

Developing successful writing teachers: Outcomes of professional development exploring teachers' perceptions of themselves as writers and writing teachers and their students' attitudes and abilities to write across the curriculum

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ABSTRACT: Writing is a complex, recursive and difficult process that requires strategic decision-making across multiple domains (Graham, 2006; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Students are expected to use this process to communicate with a variety of audiences for a variety of purposes. Modelling and providing effective instruction is critical, especially in elementary grades, when students begin to experience difficulties in learning to write and use writing to learn content across the curriculum. Professional development can foster teachers' writing proficiency and in turn improve students' writing achievements. This mixed methods study examined elementary teachers' attitudes towards writing, perceptions of themselves as writing teachers, their students' attitudes towards writing and the extent to which these attitudes and perceptions improved after ten weeks of research-based professional development. Pre- and post-workshop surveys were administered to teachers, classroom observations were conducted, and students' writing portfolios collected to examine the quality of writing over the course of one semester. Results indicate that a majority of participants had positive attitudes towards writing, felt competent teaching some domains of writing (for example, generating prompts), but not all (for example, revising and editing). Recommendations include more involvement of teachers in developing the content and design of PD workshops.

KEYWORDS: professional development, teachers' attitudes toward writing, teachers' feelings of competency as writing teachers, writing across the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic instruction is a key element in helping students write well and use writing to learn subject matter across the curriculum. Providing effective instruction is especially critical in elementary grades, when students begin to experience difficulties in learning to write, because waiting until later grades to remedy such problems does not often yield successful results (Slavin, Madden & Karweit, 1989). Elementary teachers' roles include: modeling, explicit instruction, and providing students with opportunities to engage and practice writing across domains and across disciplines (Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2013; Graves, 1983; Newell, 2006). Teachers must feel competent as writers and writing teachers in order to provide the kind of instruction and modeling that will help students develop into proficient writers. However, in a high-stakes learning environment, teachers often feel that they neither have the ability nor the time to provide quality writing instruction. Professional development (PD) can foster in-service teachers' writing proficiency within a comprehensive writing program, which will in turn improve students' writing

achievements across content areas such as math, science, social studies and geography (Wood & Lieberman, 2000).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the conceptual framework that writing is a complex and recursive process that requires strategic decision-making across multiple domains and content areas (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998; Graham, 2006; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Newell, 2006). Students are expected to use this complex process to communicate with a variety of audiences for a variety of purposes. However, this process is difficult for novices; and not surprisingly, US state and national indicators continue to show that students are not achieving well in writing (Dyson & Freedman, 1991; National Commission on Writing, 2003).

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) state that because quality instruction is highly predictive of students' achievement, it is necessary for teachers to be competent in various subject-specific disciplines. Empirical studies in elementary through high-school, classroom-writing instruction have demonstrated that teachers' beliefs about writing and perceptions about themselves as writers can impact their writing instruction and students' writing development (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony & Stevens, 1991; Englert, Mariage & Dunsmore, 2006; Hillocks, 1986). Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) cited evidence from both teacher surveys and examination of student essays showing that trained teachers provided students with significantly more opportunities for writing, and students of competent teachers outscored students of non-trained teachers. These studies have important implications in conceptualising the roles of elementary teachers and their ability to engage in pedagogical practices that will foster students' writing development. A core principle of the National Writing Project (NWP) in the US therefore, is to provide opportunities for teachers to understand the full spectrum of writing, and help them envision themselves as writers.

Various approaches have been suggested as being effective in planning, organising, and delivering effective writing instruction. They include: (a) The National Writing Project model that stresses writing as a recursive process, and encourages instruction in the development of fluency, form, and mechanical accuracy (Blau, 1988); (b) group rather than individual revision conferences (Fitzgerald & Stamm, 1990); (c) free writing, inquiry, and revision rather than the imitation of models or isolated study of grammar (Hillocks, 1986); (d) explicit instruction in prewriting strategies (Goldstein & Carr, 1996); (e) specific suggestions and feedback provided to students in response to their writing, in the context of collaborative relationship between teacher and student writers, (Straub, 1997; Gutierrez, 1994); and (f) scaffolding of informational writing and response to literature, (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Generally, effective writing instruction should make connections to children's lives outside the classroom. Teachers are urged to use authentic and challenging tasks as writing prompts and to integrate writing to learn into other disciplines across the curriculum, not just as a component of English Language Arts (ELA) (Chapman, 2006). Teachers need increased time for writing, as they engage with students in crafting pieces and demonstrating writing steps through think-alouds, mini-lessons, monitoring and conferencing (Calkins, 2010). The PD workshops integrated many elements of the

above approaches considered best practice in writing instruction. The sessions also included strategies that could be used to scaffold writing development for struggling mainstream students, English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with special needs (SPED).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This mixed-methods study examines: (a) teachers' attitudes towards writing instruction and their perceived competency as writers, (b) teachers' perceptions of their students' attitudes towards writing, and (c) the extent to which teachers' feelings of competency as writers and writing instructors improved after they completed ten weeks of research-based PD workshops.

CONTEXT

The PD was conducted within the context of a partnership between a school district in Central Massachusetts and the local university. Four elementary schools, two of which were Title I¹ schools had been identified for improvement based on the English Language Arts (ELA) 2008 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) standardised test results. Fifty-three percent (53%) of grade four students fell into the Needs Improvement or Warning category. Subject area sub-scores indicated that students had attained only 58% of all possible points in the reporting categories of "Composition: Topic Development", 19.5% of all possible points for the "Open Response" item type, and 13.7% of all possible points in the "Writing Prompt" item type. Data from the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)² subgroups showed that 89% of Students with Disabilities and 67% of low-income students fell into either the "Needs Improvement" or "Warning" categories. A state grant was awarded to provide professional development in the priority area of writing, to teams of teachers of all 3rd- and 4th-grade classrooms, within a comprehensive program that would integrate writing across the content areas such as Math, Social Studies, Science and other school disciplines. An additional need in the this public school district had come about due to the severe budget restraints that had plagued many school systems across Massachusetts, resulting in the elimination of 75%, (three out of four) of the professional development days scheduled for the 2009-2010 school year.

This project was initiated to help restore a portion of those lost professional development opportunities for up to twenty-eight (28) third- and fourth-grade teachers in the school district, while keeping the focus on student success in literacy. Up to 700 students of all participating teachers would be served in the first year. In the second and third years of the project, participating teachers would act as trainers, mentors and peer models for their colleagues within and across grade levels from kindergarten through and including grade 5, following the model of the National Writing Project

¹ Title 1 is a federally funded program through which the US Department of Education provides supplemental funding to local school districts to meet the needs of at-risk and low-income students in an attempt to bridge the gap between low-income students and other students.

² Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a measurement that allows the US Department of Education to determine how public schools and school districts are performing academically according to results of standardised tests.

(Blau, 1988). The school district approached the university, and three faculty members from the Language Arts and Literacy program of the Graduate School of Education were selected to develop the workshop content and facilitate sessions. This research article is, however, written by only one of the university partners.

CONTENT OF WORKSHOP

The content of the professional development was based on guidelines set by the grantor, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE); “to assist participating schools with implementation of new practices and/or refinement of existing practices, improve educator effectiveness, and turn around the lowest performing school districts.” Three mandatory pre-workshop meetings were organised by the regional office of DESE, bringing together school-based education support personnel and university partners to network, identify critical issues, share knowledge about target strategies to be used in workshop delivery, and plan accordingly. Participants discussed important components of the Massachusetts English Language Arts curriculum frameworks and examined possible alignments to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that would go into effect in 2012. The Common Core State Standards are designed to prepare students for college and careers after high school and provide them with skills necessary to become more competitive in a global economy.

At break-out sessions, designated university partners met with literacy specialists of participating schools to determine the thrust and content of the PD. In our small group discussion with literacy specialists, it became apparent that many of the teachers at this school district used the Writers’ Workshop or other process writing approach (planning, drafting, revising, editing, conferencing and publishing) for instruction. We (university partners) decided that our focus would be to refine existing practices. The PD content integrated many elements of the National Writing Project and the Writers’ Workshop (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983). The objectives were for participants to:

1. Examine the purpose of writing, their writing habits, and identify their strengths and weaknesses as writers.
2. Learn useful strategies to motivate both themselves and their students become more successful writers
3. Participate in and learn to construct mini-lessons in writing workshops that include: writing, conferencing, editing and publishing
4. Learn effective methods for evaluating students’ writing, using portfolios and rubrics, and
5. Learn how to scaffold writing instruction for English Language Learners (ELLs) and Students with Special Needs (SPED).

METHOD

Participants

Twenty-eight participants from all four elementary schools in the district participated in the workshops for ten weeks. Participants included: eleven 4th-grade teachers, four 3rd-grade teachers, four 2nd-grade teachers, three 1st-grade teachers, one kindergarten

teacher, two Reading Specialists, two Special Education teachers and one Academic Coach. The reading specialists, SPED teacher, and academic coach also doubled as 4th-grade teachers in their respective schools. All workshop participants were female of Caucasian descent. They all signed informed consents; however, only twenty-one (n=21) participants completed both the pre- and post workshop surveys for this study.

Teacher surveys

Pre- and post-workshop surveys were administered to teachers and one pre-workshop survey administered to consenting students of all participating teachers. This paper however, focuses on the teacher component of the study. The paper and pencil surveys were administered anonymously with participants' identities concealed. Participants selected their own unique nicknames and identifying numbers so that pre- and post-workshop survey responses could be matched. This level of anonymity was important given the nature of the study, which deals with attitudes and perceived competencies in writing.

The survey, adapted from Elbow and Belanoff (2003), included Likert scale-type items and open response questions. Questions and prompts focused on teachers' attitudes toward writing instruction, their feelings of competency as writers and writing teachers, and perceptions of their students' attitudes and abilities toward writing. Items on the questionnaire required "Yes", "No", "Sometimes", or "Not Applicable" answers, and open-ended questions that generated more lengthy responses. Given that the sample (n=21) of participants was small for robust factor analyses, the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions were thoroughly analysed to get more insights into participants' perspectives.

Part 1 of the Teacher Survey examined teachers' general attitudes towards specific domains of writing, and their perceived competency as writers and writing teachers regarding those domains. Subtitles were: (1) Attitudes/Perceptions toward Writing, (2) Generating, (3) Revising, (4) Feedback, (5) Collaboration, (6) Awareness and Control of Writing Process. Discrete items in these sections included the following questions:

1. *Attitudes/Perceptions toward writing*: Do you enjoy writing? Do you think of yourself as a good writer? In general do you trust yourself as a person who can find good words and ideas and perceptions?
2. *Generating*: On a topic of interest to you, can you come up with ideas or insights, you had not thought of before? On a topic *not* of interest, can you come up with ideas or insights you'd not thought of before?
3. *Revising*: Can you revise effectively? Can you make your sentences lively? Can you give them a human voice?
4. *Feedback*: Can you give non-critical feedback – telling the writer what you would like and summarising or reflecting what you hear the words saying? Can you give criterion-based feedback – telling the writer how the draft matches up against the most common criteria of good writing?
5. *Collaboration*: Can you work on a task collaboratively with a small group, pitch in, share the work, help the group cooperate, keep the group on task?
6. *Awareness and control of writing process*: Can you give a detailed account of what was going on when you were writing – the thoughts and feelings that go

through your mind and the things that happen in the text? Do you notice problems or “stuck points” in your writing and figure out what the causes are? (adapted from Elbow & Belanoff, 2003, pp.xxvii).

Part 1 contained a total of 33 discreet items.

Part 2 of the survey examined teachers’ perceptions of their students’ attitudes towards writing, their evaluation of students’ abilities as writers and their feelings of competency in providing effective writing instruction that would help their students become more proficient writers. Broad categories were the same as part 1, but discreet items were different. Examples of some discreet items in Part 2 were: “Do you think your students enjoy writing? Explain why or why not. Do you feel comfortable with organising cooperative writing groups such as Writer’s Workshop? Do you think [your students] can revise effectively...organise main ideas, fix most mistakes during revising... Some helpful hints that I give my students include... What would you like to learn most as a writing teacher?” Part 2 had a total of 22 questions/prompts.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education also hired an independent consultant to do an end-of-workshop evaluation to determine workshop effectiveness. The online survey was administered to participants through survey monkey, but participants also had the option of taking the survey through paper and pencil. The first part of the survey required teachers to provide their professional backgrounds, including years of teaching. Then they were asked to rate the workshop content and facilitators on a scale using a series of prompts including the following:

1. How would you describe the information provided to you through professional development?
2. How would you describe the amount of time allotted for this professional development?
3. How would you describe the quality of materials used for the professional development?
4. How would you rate the instructors/consultants, in regard to (a) level of knowledge, (b) preparation, (C) presentation skills and (d) responsiveness?

The data from this survey were shared with the university partners, and provided additional insights into participants’ perspectives.

Professional development workshops

Sessions began after teachers had turned in pre-workshop survey responses. There were a total of ten sessions distributed over a period of ten weeks. Sessions were conducted in a traditional-style classroom from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. In eight of the ten sessions, facilitators demonstrated aspects of the writing process: record-keeping, conferencing, and evaluating students’ writing through the use of portfolios, and the Six-Traits-plus-one rubric (Spandel, 2004), and in two, strategies that could be used to scaffold the writing development of struggling students, ELLs and students with special needs. The strategies included: the Language Experience Approach (Allan, 1976), a collaborative interactive writing strategy useful for instructing struggling writers, and the Mnemonic, TREE (Topic Sentence, Reasons, Explain, Ending), an

effective strategy for teaching persuasive and opinion essays to students who have been identified as having Attention Hyperactive Deficiency Disorder (ADHD).

At the first session, we encouraged participants to discuss what they felt they could do as writers, what their students could or could not do, what approaches they used in teaching writing, and concerns that they had regarding their students' performances on the MCAS. This session was lively and it was apparent that the teachers were excited about the opportunity to hone their writing skills and learn strategies that would improve their instructional practices, and consequently their students' performance in standardised tests.

Workshop sessions followed a general pattern of facilitators demonstrating skills, and teacher-participants writing and sharing their work in small groups. For example, one facilitator demonstrated how to guide students to write to prompts generated from literature that they were reading. Students would have to find evidence for their answers from the text, draw reasonable inferences from the text and also show what they knew about that evidence in the real world. For example, from Lowry's *The Giver*, a question might be, "What does it mean to be released?" The students could find evidence of the old, sick and disruptive "released" in the text (text-to-text connections); show if they knew about similar instances in their world (text-to-self) and illustrate with evidence of how in the real world some societies killed the old and terminally ill (text-to-world). Although in current practices the term "euthanasia" may be used, students should be able to make the connection that the term basically meant the same as when a person is "released" in *The Giver*, a euphemism for "killing".

In the subsequent session, participants selected narrative prompts from a list to write about, and continued working on their topics at home for two weeks. When all final copies were brought in, one of the workshop facilitators guided the teachers through reflective brainstorming to identify the protocols that they had followed during writing. The workshop facilitator provided the following leads: "The first thing I did after reading the prompt was..., next..., then...." Participants responded with answers that included "connecting to my background knowledge, visualising, highlighting main words, considering multiple meanings of words, came up with a hypothesis and used words that fit the hypothesis." The facilitator pointed out the recursive nature of writing as they constantly moved back and forth, revisiting various stages of the writing process while they were working on their writings. Most sessions followed this routine – demonstration, application, and debriefing – with implied and often direct pointers on how teachers could re-enact learned strategies in their classrooms.

Classroom observations

Eight weeks into the training, two of the three workshop facilitators observed two writing lessons (3rd and 4th grades) at two of the four participating schools. Six teachers had volunteered to have us come into their classrooms for observation, but we settled on two, based mainly on how their writing periods fitted our own work schedules. We had a pre-observation meeting with the teachers prior to visiting the classrooms, at which we communicated to them that our main reason for observing was to examine the extent to which they were implementing target practices as part of the composing process.

We used the “Observational Notes for Writing Instruction” (adapted from Henk, Marinak, Moore and Mallette, 2003) to record field notes. The template had three sections: (1) Classroom Climate/ Participants’ Attitudes, (2) Writing Process and (3) Writing Strategies. The Classroom Climate section provided for observation of students’ attitudes/evidence of enthusiasm towards writing, shared understanding of good writing, and materials available (for example, checklist, organisers, books and collaboration). The Writing Process section included sub-titles such as: pre-writing, drafting, conferencing and revising; and the Writing Strategies section was broken down into: types of writing instruction (for example, direct instruction on grammar and whole class discussion on writing structures), types of individual writing strategies (for example, connections to personal experience and other texts, use of story grammar) and strategies for collaboration.

The 3rd-grade classroom observer did not write extensive field notes but noted that the 40-45 minutes lesson she observed mostly focused on helping students brainstorm and plan to write a narrative piece on their families and friends. Prior to this observation, the teacher had provided students with a variety of topics from which to choose, and the teacher used this period to model how students could use graphic organisers to generate ideas for writing. She handed out blank graphic organisers and each student generated ideas for his/her selected topic. The lesson was fast-paced and the students, who appeared to be familiar with using graphic organisers for brainstorming, had no trouble performing the task. Both the teacher and the Special Education teacher who was co-teaching in this inclusive classroom circulated and helped individual students with their graphic organisers. After the lesson, the observer had a quick debriefing with the SPED teacher, who informed her that even though the graphic organisers had not been modified for SPED students, they could complete the task with one-on-one help. She had not put them into ability groups for this activity, because each of them had a different topic and would benefit more from individualised help.

I observed a 4th-grade writing lesson from 11.05am to 11.50am (approximately 45 minutes). During the observation, I recorded field-notes and later examined the field-notes to determine whether target elements of the writer’s workshop were being emphasised during the lesson. The writing prompt in the 4th-grade class was, “Write a creative story on how you would catch a leprechaun. Detail the steps you would take.” The class was at the revision stage, and Ms Lucy (pseudonym) taught a mini-lesson on how to use figurative language to enrich the paragraphs students had earlier drafted. She stated the objective of the lesson, followed by whole-class brainstorming. She used questioning, demonstration and examples to clarify the meaning of figurative language, and then passed out a handout listing figurative language and their definitions: similes, metaphors, personification, onomatopoeia, hyperboles, alliteration and idioms. For guided practice, Ms Lucy placed a short paragraph containing figures of speech on the overhead projector and asked the students to identify the figurative language used in the passage. The paragraph read:

I was a million miles away from school, homework, and paper route! The world was a frosted wedding cake. From the large window, the snow looked like marshmallows topping. Inside the lodge, a great fire licked at a streaming kettle of spicy apple cider.

The ensuing discussion was lively and many students’ hands shot up to identify the figures of speech. Students were asked to come up with more of their own examples, before being instructed to take out the drafts and continue working. As they wrote, the

teacher circulated, giving additional help. I also circulated to see if students were using appropriate figures. The lesson was followed by a short debriefing with the classroom teacher, during which I asked her a few questions of clarification on some aspects of the lesson and the physical classroom context. I then requested that samples of students' written products from this lesson and the follow-up lessons be included in the portfolios that I would pick up at the end of the semester.

ANALYSES

Univariate analyses of survey data were conducted comparing pre- and post-workshop responses to determine changes in workshop participants' attitudes towards writing, their perceived feelings of competence as writers and writing teachers, and their perceptions of their students' attitudes towards writing, and writing proficiency. "Yes" and "Sometimes" responses were calculated together and, if these percentages improved post survey, they were considered positive shifts; if the percentages decreased post survey, they were considered negative shifts. A Fisher Exact Probability Test ($p < .05$) was used to determine statistical significance in pre- and post-survey responses.

Narrative responses were analyzed and coded to find themes that emerged from open-ended questions. Themes were categorised depending on the frequency of responses, and emerging and disappearing categories that occurred pre- and post-workshop were noted. These qualitative data provided the researcher with deeper understandings of participants' perspectives.

FINDINGS

Attitudes towards writing and perceptions of competency

Results indicate that many of the teachers began the workshop feeling positive or somewhat positive about writing, and feeling competent in performing various components of writing such as: revising, generating ideas, collaborating, and having control over the writing process. Overall, the positive attitude toward writing improved from 88.87% pre-workshop, to 93% post-workshop (indicating a positive shift). Some participants, who identified that they enjoyed writing, qualified their enjoyment as depending on "what I am writing", "the subject/topic", and "when I write". Two participants described the type of writing they enjoyed as "mostly personal letters", while two others identified "template writing" and "technical materials" as the types of writing they did not enjoy. (See Figure 1 for "Do You Enjoy Writing?" and Figure 2 for pre-post test-ID match on the category).

Predominantly, participants who indicated that they enjoyed writing also thought of themselves as good writers (85.7%). In response to the prompt, "Good writers know how to..." these participants responded: "engage readers/audience", "express thoughts/ideas", "communicate effectively", "use words", "use details", and "write creatively". Participants who identified themselves as good writers, also seemed to know characteristics of good writing. In response to the prompt, "Good writing must

have...”, these participants stated, “voice”, “clarity”, “purpose”, “organisation”, “fluency”, “details”, and “emotion”.

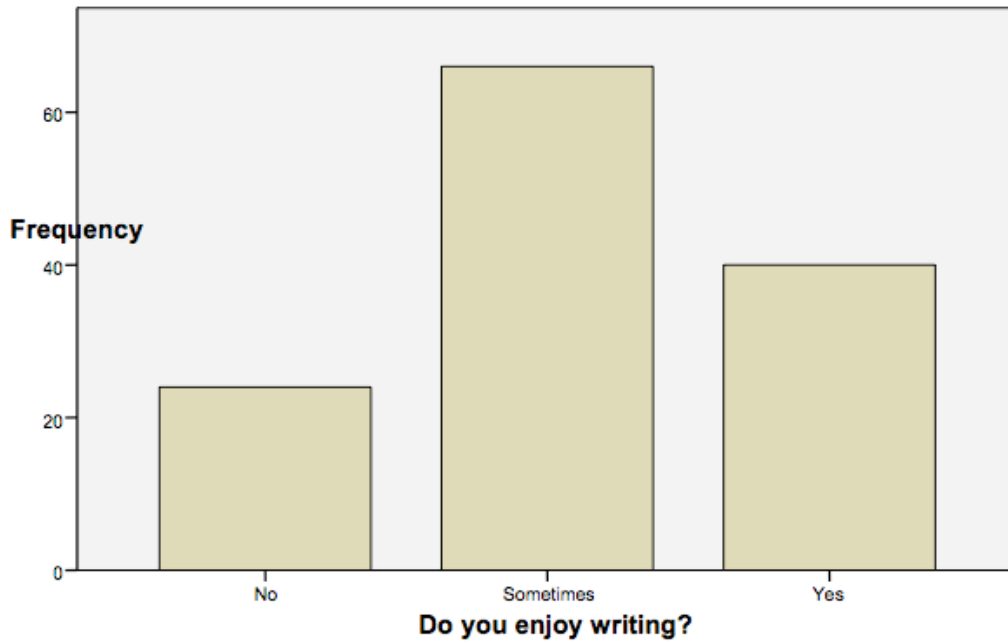


Figure 1. Do You Enjoy Writing?

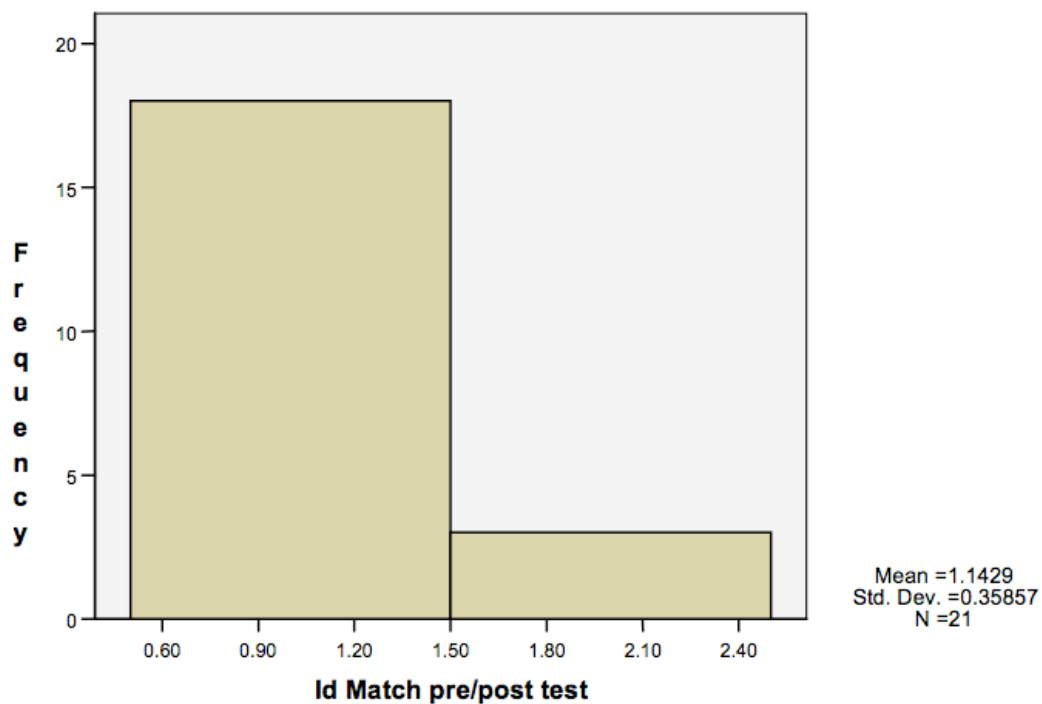


Figure 2. Pre-Post Test: Do You Enjoy Writing?

However, despite an improvement on workshop participants’ general attitude towards writing, some negative shifts were noted in participants’ ability to perform specific domains of writing such as revising and editing. Teachers’ perceived ability to revise effectively showed a slight negative shift from 92% pre-workshop to about 91.79%

post workshop. Although the Fisher Exact Probability test indicated that this shift is not significant ($p = 0.9999$) given the small sample ($n=21$), such a shift is still worthy of note in terms of percentages. Higher percentages of negative shifts were observed post-workshop in the following writing domains: generating ideas, giving feedback, collaboration and control of writing. Teachers' perceived ability to generate ideas shifted negatively from 88.05% pre-workshop to 69.1% post workshop; and their ability to give feedback slid from 86.75 % to 76.18. Their feelings of competency to collaborate during the writing process slipped from 95.3 to 94% and their control of writing from 90.48% to 77%.

A noticeable negative shift emerged post-workshop about teacher's perceived ability to motivate their students to write. Many participants felt their students were not motivated to write and they did not know how to motivate their students. In response to the question, "What would you like to learn most as a writing teacher?" more participants (9) stated "motivation" post-survey – an increase in number from seven, pre-survey. Some of the reasons teachers gave for students' apparent lack of motivation included the inability to find a topic of interest to write about and their tendency to see writing as a chore. One teacher wrote, "I would like to know how to inspire my students to *want* to write...how to get them to want to revise, improve their writing," and another, "...how to motivate writers and prepare them for standardised tests." Some teachers surmised that often their students' lack of motivation led to poor writing abilities which correlated with poor test scores. Another major area of challenge for teachers was finding time to teach writing. Some participants' quotes included: [I have difficulties with] "...time management techniques with 26 students!" and, "I have difficulty...organising writing workshops because of the amount of time that goes into it."

These negative shifts were intriguing and I analysed open-ended responses more closely to determine what factors may have accounted for teachers' increased feelings of incompetency after having just participated in 10 weeks of professional development. Ideas that emerged in participants' post-survey responses were categorised as "Emerging Themes", and if ideas that were highlighted pre-survey were no longer present or diminished pre-survey, I categorised them as "Disappearing Themes". Based on the frequency of responses, I identified the following emerging themes as domains of writing that teacher-participants identified as having learned during the PD: (1) writing to a topic of interest; (2) avoiding template writing; (3) describing and showing voice; (4) organise writing workshops in their own classrooms; and (5) evaluating students' writing. Disappearing themes included: writing creatively and showing voice. It is noteworthy that out of 21 participants, only one teacher expressed the wish to improve her own writing skills so that she could in turn impact her students' writing proficiency. This teacher wrote: [I would like to know] "how to improve my own writing and my students'." The apparent inability of workshop participants to see a correlation between teacher knowledge and student performance is significant and will be examined in the discussion section.

Teachers' perceptions of students' attitudes towards writing

A majority of teachers, 66.7% (14 out of 21), considered that their students enjoyed writing while 33.7% felt their students did not enjoy writing. Those who did not think their students enjoyed writing, said students often thought writing was "boring", "a

difficult chore”, “tedious”, “non-creative”, “physically hurts”, [required] “much editing”, “don’t feel successful”, [was] “time consuming” and “frustrating”. Two participants wrote: “My students struggle with both reading and writing. They come to me for help with both. They have done so much writing over and over in MCAS that they are turned off.” “Some love it, most seem indifferent, few HATE it. They moan and groan when we approach writing.”

Participants who responded that their students “Sometimes” enjoyed writing included certain caveats for such enjoyment: “My students who enjoy reading, enjoy writing,” “Some students love to write, while others view it as a painful process,” “If it is a topic of interest, Yes. If it is not something interesting to them, No,” “They enjoy writing about a topic of their choice,” “Some kids have great overall attitudes in general, and there seems to be a correlation to their enthusiasm for participation in writing tasks.” Often, students who were identified as good readers by their teachers were said to enjoy writing, too, confirming a-priori evidence found in the research indicating that good readers are often good writers.

Two participants wrote, “I am excited about teaching writing, so typically, my students enjoy writing,” “I love to teach writing and have grown much being a writing teacher.” Taking a cue from these responses, I paired respondents’ pre and post surveys, to see if there was a correlation between teachers’ attitudes towards writing and their perceptions of their students’ attitudes towards writing. Out of twenty-one (21) participants, three (14.3%) had responded “N” to the question, “Do you enjoy writing?” Paired pre- and post-survey responses indicated that these participants had consistently selected “S” for the question, “Do you think your students enjoy writing?” showing no correlation between a teacher’s attitude toward writing, and their perception of their students’ attitudes towards writing.

Classroom observations

Classroom observations of two teachers were conducted. However, only one of the observations in the 4th-grade classroom was accompanied by detailed field-notes that were analysed. On entering Ms Lucy’s (pseudonym) 4th-grade class, I was immediately struck by the lack of students’ writing samples on display in the classroom. There were several ready-made posters relating to writing, such as: “Traits of Writing”, “Writing Process”, “Have You Used Your Adjectives today?” and “Let Context Clues Solve your Word Mysteries”. There were also ready-made pictures of various US presidents on the classroom walls, and students’ drawings of historical figures (for example, the Lincoln Monument found in Washington, DC), with students’ names scribbled under each drawing.

The students seemed engaged and enthusiastic about writing, and comprehension seemed to be occurring, since several hands were raised when the teacher asked guiding questions about elements of story grammar. The following dialogue ensued between the teacher and students:

Teacher: What would you write at the beginning of the story? *[After several attempts, a student said “Character” which appeared to be the right response, since the teacher accepted the answer and provided praise.]*

Teacher: What next?

Student: Setting.

Teacher: What goes in the middle of the story? [*After several attempts...*]

Student: The plot!

Teacher: Yes, the plot. Make sure you use details, adjectives, dialogue, juicy words, figurative language....

Although all the students were writing on what could be considered a rather inauthentic prompt based on a fairy tale character, a leprechaun, Ms Lucy included some effective writing strategies in her mini-lesson to make the topic more relatable to students' lives. The practice paragraph used to illustrate figurative language described a snowy day, and seemed like an effective hook that drew students into the lesson and activated their background knowledge of the winter season in New England. Students could relate to figures of speech like "the snow looked like marshmallows topping". She also encouraged students to use details and "juicy" words to revise their essays so that readers could picture the scene they were describing.

During debriefing, I asked Ms Lucy if students had completed any writing samples, and she responded that they had. We discussed the idea of students having the opportunity to publish their completed work within the context of the classroom, and she informed me that sure, they did publish, and that the drawings on the walls were products of a project on US government. I subtly asked her if they had written anything to go with the pictures and she said, yes indeed they had, but those writings were filed in their portfolios. I requested that copies of the finished product of this particular session be included in the students' writing portfolios that I would pick up at the end of the semester. An examination of students' essays indicated that many of them had used descriptive words but few had used figures of speech. The following are two excerpts from students' writing:

It was a warm sunny day on the day before St. Patty's day. When I was walking my dogs Titus and Kyzer at the park, my dogs started barking, Bark, Bark, Bark! "What is it boys?" I said. There is a little creature in the meadow," Kyzer said. (Jason, pseudonym)

We caught the leprechaun and I wanted to keep him as a pet. However, I needed to ask my mom. When I did, she was shocked, but she said, "yes." I was as happy as a clam! When my friends came over, they liked him... (Ally, Pseudonym)

External evaluator findings

Data from the independent consultants' survey provided insights into participants' evaluation of the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of the PD. Sixteen out of the 28 workshop participants took the online survey. Of those who participated, one had taught from 4-7 years (6.3%); two from 8-10 years (12.5%); seven from 11-20 years, (43.8%); and six, twenty years and more (37.5%). The response rate for prompts that required participants to rate the degree of a construct was 100%, while the two open-response prompts requiring participants to write freely on what they thought were strengths of the workshop and also provide suggestions on how the PD could be improved only had eight out of sixteen (50%) respondents, and eleven out of sixteen (68.75%) respondents respectively.

Asked to describe the information provided them through the PD on a scale of “Too Simplistic”, “Appropriately Challenging”, or “Too difficult”, eleven participants (68.8%) described the workshop as appropriately challenging, while five, (31.3 %) thought it was too simplistic. Fourteen participants (87.5%) described the amount of time allotted for the PD as “About Right” and two (12.5%) as “Too Long”. As earlier stated, the workshop had run for ten weeks.

Regarding the quality of the materials used for PD, 9 out of the 16 participants (60.0%) found the quality of materials used as “adequate”, 2 (13.3%) found the quality “good”, while 4 (26.7%) found the quality of materials “poor”. Regarding the relevance of the PD to their work with students, 13 participants (81.3%) found the PD to be “Somewhat Relevant”, 1 participant (6.3%) found it “Very relevant”, while 2 (12.5%) did not find the PD relevant to their work with students. Participants were asked to describe their content knowledge before and after the PD workshop on a scale of “Poor”, “Adequate”, “Good”, or “Excellent”. 14 teachers (87.5%) described their knowledge as “Good”, before PD, and this number increased to 15 (93.8%) after PD. 2 teachers (12.5%) felt their knowledge was “Adequate” pre-workshop, and this number dropped to 1 (6.3%) post workshop. No participant felt their knowledge was “Poor” pre-workshop, nor “Excellent”, post workshop. When asked to rate their instructional practices in relation to the PD, 12 participants (75%) evaluated it as “good”, pre-workshop, and 14 (87.5%) post-workshop. There was a drop in the number of participants’ who described their instructional practices as simply adequate from 4 (25%) to 2 (12.5%). Again, none chose “Poor” nor “Excellent” in practice prior to, and after PD. 8 participants (50%) said they would recommend the PD to others “with some reservations”, 1 (6.3%) said she “absolutely” would recommend, while 7 participants (43.8%) said they would not recommend the PD to others.

Perceived strengths of the PD

Participants valued the opportunity to work with other colleagues from schools across the district, since this gave them the chance to share experiences that they could relate to their own classrooms. In two open responses, participants indicated that they thought the workshop facilitators were experienced with the MCAS. According to them, this was a good thing, since this meant the facilitators could appreciate the pressure under which they were working to improve test scores. In terms of learned strategies that they could use to improve their students’ writing, participants identified “how to generate writing prompts” and how to help their students “edit journal writing”.

Weaknesses

Participants identified three main areas of weaknesses with the PD: (1) The content of the workshop; (2) the manner in which some of the workshop sessions were run; and (3) the materials used. One participant wrote, “I had hoped to learn tips, strategies and methods to help my students improve their writing ability. I must have misunderstood the purpose of the PD, because it seemed more geared towards having participants explore their own writing.” Another complained that, “too much time was spent writing, and not enough assessment or discussion about teaching writing to students.”

One participant felt there was too much emphasis on “simple ideas” but “not enough focus on the core”.

In terms of delivery, participants decried the lack of collaboration among their grade-level colleagues, the lack of more hands-on activities, and the imbalance of facilitation time among instructors – “too much of one instructor talking for 2 hours at a class”. They indicated that collaboration with grade-level colleagues would have given them insights into strategies that they could use to solve specific classroom problems. One wrote: “I would have liked to have more input from the highly experienced teachers present at the class.”

Some participants thought that the materials used were “not up to date”, and not always appropriate for their specific grade level. Others complained that most of the information they were given about the MCAS was culled from the department of education website, which they themselves had access to and often read. One participant was unhappy that the PD was also a research project because she felt that the research component was more important to the facilitators than the PD component.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study reinforces the notion that writing is a complex process requiring skills in many domains from generating ideas, using voice to communicate effectively, to publishing. Teachers must feel competent in their use of these processes in order to effectively help their students become proficient writers. Professional development can help teachers develop their writing abilities while improving their competence as writing teachers (Wood & Lieberman, 2000). After ten weeks of PD workshops, teachers had improved their skills in certain areas such as writing to a topic of interest, avoiding template-writing, describing and showing voice, and feeling competent in organising writing workshops in their own classrooms. However, many participants did not feel that they could adequately help their students generate ideas, revise, and edit; nor did they feel competent motivating their students to want to write. Their ability to manage time for writing effectively in a standards-driven educational environment also appeared to be a major challenge.

Participants’ responses were inconsistent and sometimes conflicting pre-and post-survey, making the task of drawing precise conclusions from both quantitative and qualitative data complex. For example, in response to the question “Do you enjoy writing?” Marylyn (pseudonym) stated “S” (for Sometimes) pre workshop, but in her post-survey response, she selected “N” (for “No”). I interpreted these inconsistencies as an indication of the uncertainty in teachers’ minds regarding their perceived ability in performing certain writing tasks, and feelings of inadequacy in successfully teaching those domains of writing. This suggests that competency in one or more domains of writing may not necessarily engender feelings of competency in performing in other domains. Post-survey questions to which teachers responded “Sometimes” were often qualified with phrases like “depending on the topic” or “depending on the purpose”, making it difficult to generalise competency in such domains as an indication that participants could consider themselves proficient independent writers. The complexity and even contradictions in teachers’ responses

following PD workshops has been noted elsewhere in the literature (Locke, Whitehead & Dix, 2013).

Insights gleaned from participants' responses in the independent consultant survey indicated that participants may not have clearly understood the design of the PD workshop. Workshop facilitators had designed the workshop content following the National Writing Project model (Blau, 1988), which holds as one of its basic tenets the belief that to teach writing well, teachers must themselves be writers. PD workshop objectives therefore targeted two main groups of participants: teachers and their students. This was based on workshop facilitators' belief that teacher learning must be embedded in initiatives designed to improve students' learning outcomes. Teacher participants on the other hand seemed to have begun the training with only their students learning objectives in mind, and did not appear to see the rationale behind exploring their own writing habits and abilities. Time spent exploring their writing competences was construed as wasted time that could have been spent demonstrating specific teaching strategies that they could use in their classroom to help their students.

PD workshop providers should therefore schedule adequate time for teachers to explore their own writing skills, and demonstration time to guide them on how to translate learned skills into effective classroom instructional practices. PD workshops need to be offered for extended periods (beyond ten weeks) so that participants can hone learned skills and reflect on how to transfer those skills to classroom contexts. Existing literature suggests a year-long duration may be required for teachers to effectively learn new classroom practices for implementation (Swan, 2003). One of our sessions had provided participants the opportunity to reflect on the "History of a Piece", and the discussion that followed was lively and insightful. During this discussion, teachers seemed to develop a better understanding of the process of topic selection and how they could guide students to do the same in their own classrooms.

Not surprisingly, a significant number of participants indicated that generating good writing prompts for students was one skill they had learned. One participant even qualified what she had learned in this respect as "excellent strategies". Such discussions should be a part of all professional development sessions. Reflective discussions would be especially necessary in sessions dealing with writing domains that teachers identify as important and/or difficult (for example, revising and editing). Participants in both the pre- and post-survey responded that revising and editing were some of the skills that good writers should possess; yet a slight negative shift occurred in participants' perceived ability to revise, and higher negative shifts in their perceived abilities to give feedback, collaborate and be in control of their writing. Since 93% of workshop participants had indicated a positive attitude towards writing and a perception of themselves as good writers (content knowledge), more time ought to have been spent demonstrating effectively instructional strategies (pedagogical knowledge) that they could use to improve their students' writing.

Another interpretation of the negative shift in teachers' perceived abilities to edit and revise could be attributed to the possibility that after the treatment, participants developed a better appreciation of the importance of revising and editing, and therefore reassessed their abilities to perform and teach these domains negatively. This conclusion would not be unusual given that previous research has indicated that

some teachers tend to evaluate themselves more negatively as they develop a better perspective on the demands of writing during PD workshops (Locke, Whitehead & Dix, 2013). More time would therefore be necessary to help teachers identify specific skills that they continue to find challenging after-workshop, with the provision of follow-up sessions designed to remediate areas of residual weaknesses.

Participant's responses also indicated their preference for a workshop delivery model that provided more peer/expert conversations and reciprocity rather than the lecture-style model that characterised a good proportion of the workshop sessions. Two reading specialists and one academic coach were among the workshop participants, and facilitators could have provided an opportunity for them to share insights, practical tips and strategies that would deepen teachers' knowledge and contextualise their understandings of the content of the PD. Feedback from the independent consultant survey indicated that teachers expected more of such collaboration given the expert participants present. Research on PD models that emphasis peer-coaching rather than "expert" coaching indicates that teachers tend to implement new skills learned in the context of peer-coaching more frequently and more appropriately in their own practice (Joyce & Showers, 1993). This aspect could account for the apparent lack of transfer of concepts that participants had learned (for example, providing choice in topic selection and publishing). In the 4th-grade classroom that I observed, students did not seem to have been given a choice in selecting a writing topic. Generating authentic and varied writing prompts that relate more directly to students' lives and giving students choice in selecting writing topics may increase their sense of ownership and motivate them to invest more time performing writing tasks, thus improving writing outcomes. Students also need to take pride in what they can accomplish as writers, and publishing their work within the classroom could build that sense of pride and motivate them to write more.

Another conclusion drawn from this study is that professional development should address specific needs of teachers and not simply offer generic content. An examination of the English Language Arts (ELA) Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) standardised tests results of this school district indicated that English Language Learners (ELLs), students from low Socio-Economic Status (SES) and students with special needs (SPED) were struggling with writing and needed intervention. However, rather than addressing the specific writing needs of these student populations, the bulk of the workshops addressed general writing processes for teaching mainstream students (constructing mini-lessons, conferencing, record keeping, sharing a piece and evaluating students' writing), that one of the participants referred to as "simple ideas". While these protocols are useful for all student populations, they may not have been entirely suitable for scaffolding individualised instruction for special student populations with specific writing needs. In fact, only two out of the ten sessions had explored writing strategies for English Language Learners and students with learning disabilities such as Attention Deficiency Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). One participant stated that she had hoped to be "helped with specific problem areas [rather] than being part of what one person deems is a model for writing in the classroom". Feedback from the independent consultant survey indicated that participants were discontented that valuable professional development time had been spent going over content that they already knew and did not need. This leads me to conclude that if teachers had had a greater say in determining the content and design of the professional development workshop,

they might have felt differently. Administrators, university experts and other stakeholders need to be respectful of teachers' funds of knowledge, and involve them as informed partners in the design and implementation of PD workshops.

It remains to be seen from analyses of students' writing portfolios of participating teachers whether, despite some dissatisfaction with the bulk of the workshop content, teachers had transferred some critical components of writing into their instructional practices, and if this transfer had impacted students writing development over the course of one semester. Preliminary data gathered from observations of two classrooms indicate that some transfer of learning had occurred but not entirely. While one of the observed teachers in the 3rd-grade classroom had provided choice in topic selection, the 4th-grade teacher had not. Yet, the 4th-grade writing lesson included various elements of the writer's workshop such as whole class discussion, modeling, application and teacher-student conferencing. Transfer of other traits of writing discussed during PD sessions such as voice, word choice, organisation of ideas, and proper use of writing conventions can be determined through analyses of students' writing samples.

This study confirms the view that becoming a proficient writer is a complex process of growth and development. Such growth may not be linear, and may not always be consistent across all writing domains. Yet, given sufficient opportunities, most would grow in their acquisition of writing skills and feel a stronger sense of confidence in their pedagogical abilities to teach those skills to their students.

Teachers need adequate time to reflect on their beliefs and practices, and a supportive environment where they can evaluate the effect of their practices on their students' learning in collaborative groups of their peers, administrators and other experts. Often, the fear of the consequences of high-stakes assessments may put an inordinate pressure on teachers to achieve academic results over a short period of time. Because writing is a complex and recursive process, this expected outcome may not always be realistic. Professional development has its place in improving teacher quality, especially in an era of accountability; and teachers, researchers and administrators need to work collaboratively to determine successful outcomes of such endeavours, to ensure that research and practice critically inform each other in meaningful ways that in turn impact students' academic outcomes over time.

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