Writing Skills: A Taken for Granted Assumption in Urban Graduate Teacher Education?

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Abstract

Teachers are held accountable for improving the literacy skills of PreK-12 pupils. However, the processes (or lack thereof) by which teachers at the various levels of schooling are deemed skilled and become actually prepared for such complex challenge have not been explored in depth. This article focuses on urban preservice teachers' beliefs regarding their own writing skills, compared to their actual performance on a cold prompt. Findings indicate that there is little consistency between participants' beliefs and actual writing performance. Implications for teacher educators and policy-making are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher educators juggle to meet competing needs, particularly in times of heightened awareness and debate regarding the ways teacher quality is conceptualized. A growing number of states allow those who pass the state test to teach under preliminary certification right upon graduation from a four-year degree program. This phenomenon is accentuated in urban areas, with their pervasive teacher shortages and poor teacher retention rates. The population of graduate teacher education programs in metropolitan areas includes considerable numbers of novice "teachers of record" on their rosters, who might have both less time to dedicate to coursework and little actual teaching experience. These programs also include graduates from a variety of colleges and universities, with myriad strengths and areas for further development given their pursued majors. With such diversity of academic backgrounds, writing as an essential skill that completers of a graduate program in education are expected to exhibit might not always be clearly identified by such a diverse constituency. It is worthwhile noting that graduate teacher education program in urban state universities do attract a variety of candidates from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and baccalaureate preparation.

This article reports on a small-scale qualitative study that examined the consistency between urban graduate teacher education candidates' beliefs about writing and actual performance on a cold prompt. All participants were one semester away from program completion.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

College graduates' literacy skills have been the object of much research attention. A study by the American Institutes of Research (Baer, Cook, & Baldi, 2006) surveyed the literacy skills of college graduates of two and four-year programs, indicating that over half of those surveyed lacked simple skills such as understanding and executing simple instructions or balancing a checkbook. Similarly, the outcomes of a study by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2005) revealed that a dismal 11 percent of college seniors are able to write at the proficient level, while holding the belief that college contributes to their skills in writing and

other areas. Upon graduation, writing well is amongst the most important skill degree holders need in the workforce for career advancement. Yet, remedial writing training for those who do not have appropriate writing skills--about 30 percent--costs the taxpayers an annual half billion dollars (National Commission on Writing, 2005).

In teacher education, an expectation for greater accountability in the ways in which future teachers are prepared for the workforce has intensified with mandatory teacher tests in most states. Despite disagreements regarding the necessity for such tests and the tests' ability to measure what matters most in teaching, few would challenge the notion that completers of graduate degrees in education should exhibit competent writing skills.

In teacher education, writing well irrespective of content area expertise has received little attention from researchers (Norman & Spencer, 2005). The *National Writing Project* that begun in 1974 and has since spread nationwide via federal funding confirms a long-held commitment to improving teachers' ability to teach writing. Less has been explored about teachers' own ability to write. In spite of the well-publicized awareness regarding college graduate literacy shortcomings, few graduate teacher education programs have taken the call and emphasized teacher development of level-appropriate writing skills as one of the main programmatic objectives. The generalized assumption appears to be that writing has been mastered elsewhere. It is often presumed that candidates have a command of advanced literacy skills as documented by passing scores in the state teacher test.

Insufficient writing skills likely affect significant numbers of teachers in effectively promoting high literacy skills amongst their own pupils. The literacy scores of 12th graders are stagnant or heading downwards (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002) . Only 51 percent of high school graduates who took the ACT college admission and placement exam in 2005 met the college readiness benchmark for reading (ACT, 2006). Teachers' general literacy skills, and more pointedly writing performance, are special concerns for teacher educators for the implicit effect the lack of those might bear on pupils' academic achievement.

Writing at the undergraduate level has received significant research attention: the role of writing instruction in improving learning (Herrington, 1981); the different ways writing instruction assumes in a variety of disciplines (Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis et al, 2003); and various perspectives with regards to focusing on content, grammar, or both, and the advantages and pitfalls of such approaches (Heyden, 2003; Hunter & Wallace, 1995). Yet, the outcomes of recent studies certainly challenge the effectiveness of reading and writing instruction in undergraduate programs.

Some argue that colleges have not typically put their best faculty resources in freshman and sophomore writing courses, which are often relegated to graduate assistants or low-paid faculty with little incentive to perform (Bok, 2005). Addressing the evidence about college student general literacy skills, well-resourced higher learning institutions have implemented costly writing programs staffed with reputable lecturers, exhibiting a higher degree of student success (Bartlett, 2003).

For writing instruction to change at the graduate level, however, there would be the additional need for the professional development of higher education faculty. The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) proposes that university faculty should have access to explicit training that emphasizes writing as a key tool in the development of higher-level performance in any given academic area. Successful faculty development efforts to change the way teacher education programs conduct business have been described elsewhere, intensifying the notion that given goals in teacher education are achieved when they are stressed consistently across a program by all faculty (Costa, McPhail, Smith, & Brisk, 2005).

Little has been researched about promoting writing skills at the graduate level through specific coursework focused on writing, despite growing evidence of its need. Most of the emphasis on writing well is only stressed upon those in pursuit of terminal degrees. The use of textbooks (Craswell, 2005; Swales & Feak, 2004) might be advised individually by faculty for the benefit of students who need support. The paucity of research in teaching writing skills to graduate degree seekers suggests an urgency to closely monitor graduate students' writing performance, more importantly for those who intend to pursue a career in teaching.

METHODOLOGY

This article reports on a subset of the data (N= 26) collected for a small-scale study (N= 64) conducted at an urban university whose teacher education student population includes a variety of backgrounds: students with undergraduate degrees from top-ranked and low-ranked universities and colleges; teachers of record who achieve preliminary certification by passing the state tests and students who have never taught; career changers of various ages and recent graduates; and students whose parents have attained educationally at various levels. Research indicates that parental education and family background are important factors in predicting student achievement overall, and help predict college attendance and completion rates particularly across ethnic groups (Cameron & Heckman, 2001). While the aims of the larger study is described elsewhere (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007), the examination of this subset of the data was meaningful for the deeper insights it provided on actual preservice teacher beliefs about their own writing.

Demographically, the subset sample included 22 females and 4 males, 3 students of color, and one student whose native language was not English. The gender demographics of the sample coincided with nationwide trends in teacher education regarding the dominance of females in the field (75 percent), but was lower than the 25 percent of male representation in graduate teacher education programs, at 15 percent. In terms of representation of students of color, the sample exhibited less diversity than the comparable pool of graduate teacher education students nationwide of 19 percent (AACTE, 2002), at 11.5 percent. All participants had passed the required state test to obtain initial certification.

The research questions that guided the study are: (1) What are the perceptions about their own writing of students at a graduate program leading to teacher licensure? and (2) Are student beliefs consistent with writing proficiency as demonstrated on a cold prompt? Data collected to answer these questions consisted of a cold writing prompt and a survey.

The Writing Prompt Rubric

The decision of utilizing an on-site administered cold prompt was informed by (a) a desire to mimic as much as possible the type of writing on which prospective teachers are often assessed via state tests; and (b) the existence of take-home, term-paper evidence as part of prior coursework completed by the participants in the program, but scant information on actual writing skills. It was deemed that cold-prompts resembled many of the writing activities in which teachers might be engaged on a daily basis, such as responding in a short time to multiple emails from parents, colleagues, and/or administrators.

The initial writing assignment was given a grade according to a rubric adapted from Howard, Ifekwunigwe, and Williams (2005), and included the ratings of *competent, satisfactory, marginal,* and *unsatisfactory* (see Appendix I). The prompts administered to this subset of participants were assessed by the researcher, who had at the time 5 years of experience teaching writing-intensive research courses.

The Survey

Data for the second question included short-essay answers to the following questions: (1) How comfortable do you feel about your general writing skills? and (2) How comfortable do you feel about your academic writing skills? Both questions required numeric categorization and a detailed explanation. The two types of responses were analyzed qualitatively, coding the responses that occurred with most frequency and the themes appearing from participants' short essay responses.

Analysis of the data set included: (1) a comparison between stated beliefs about writing and actual achievement in the writing prompt; and (2) an analysis of emerging themes regarding student attitudes towards general and academic writing skills. A synthesis of findings follows below.

FINDINGS

General and Academic Writing Skills: Are They Related?

Upon administration of the prompt, the participants completed the survey's short-essay responses regarding their degree of comfort with general and academic writing tasks. The difference between both was defined on the survey:

> General writing skills are those employed in writing emails, your own journal, free-write reflections you may have written for a course, etc. Academic writing skills are those utilized in formal papers for courses, thesis, articles you may submit to teachers' journals, and/or conference proposals, which typically follow an established academic writing style, such as that of the American Psychological Association (APA).

A summary of the participants' responses is depicted on Table 1:

Table 1: *Graduate Preservice teachers' Perceptions About Writing (N=26)*

	Comfort with General Writing Skills	Comfort with Academic Writing Skills	Actual Score Writing Prompt (reported in relation to Perceptions About General Writing Skills)			
			Competent	Satisfactory	Marginal	Unsatisfactory
Very Comfortable	**20 (77%)**	15	**4 (15%)**	**7 (27%)**	**7 (27%)**	**2 (8%)**
Moderately Comfortable	**6 (23%)**	9		**3 (11%)**	**2 (8%)**	**1 (4%)**
Not Comfortable	**0**	2				
Total	**26**	**26**	**4**	**10**	**9**	**3**

Seventy-seven percent of the participants in this subset of the data believed to have appropriate general writing skills, although 35 percent (9 students) in that category performed at the *marginal* or *unsatisfactory* levels on the prompt. Only 15 percent of those who believed themselves good writers scored at the *competent* level. Twenty-three percent of the participants reported to be moderately comfortable with their writing, and were actually more attune with their actual writing performance. Finally, no students in this data subset believed their writing skills needed improvement.

Previous research has indicated a higher correlation between students' beliefs about their writing and actual performance (White & Bruning, 2005). A parallel study with another subset of the data (N=38), with a more abstractly-worded prompt yielded an even larger disconnect between student beliefs about general writing skills and actual performance (for a more detailed account of such findings, see Abbate-Vaughn, 2007). For comparison purposes, results from both data subsets are offered on Table 2.

Table 2: *Comparison Between Data Subsets # 1 (N=38) and #2 (N=26)*

	General Writing #1	General Writing # 2	Competent		Satisfactory		Marginal		Unsatisfactory	
			#1	#2	# 1	#2	#1	#2	#1	#2
Very Comfortable	27 (71%)	20 (77%)	5 (13%)	4 (15%)	8 (21%)	7 (27%)	4 (11%)	7 (27%)	10 (26%)	2 (8%)
Moderately Comfortable	7 (18%)	6 (23%)			3 (8%)	3 (11%)	2 (5%)	2 (8%)	2 (5%)	1 (4%)
Not Comfortable	4 (11%)	0					2 (5%)		2 (5%)	
Totals	38 (100%)	26 (100%)	5	4	11	10	8	9	14	3

Although there is very little difference among the students' perceptions about their general writing skills, the outcomes of the cold prompt for the data subset discussed on this paper (identified as subset #2) suggest that the more precise wording, concrete topic, and stricter guidelines of the essay required impacted the students' quality of writing by diminishing performance at the *unsatisfactory* level. Similarly to the data subset #1, however, the themes that emerged from the short-essay answers included the notion that good writers might not necessarily perform well in academic writing, and that academic writing takes the enjoyment out

of writing. Evidence for such themes overlapped in participants' responses. A representative sample of those is summarized below:

> "My writing is narrative in style which conflicts with academic writing. I'm happy writing without structure" (SuS#15).
> "I feel it's very easy for me to express my thoughts in a journal or verbally, however, academic writing is difficult to follow. I prefer creative writing" (SuS# 8).
> "General writing I can do and do it every day. It's the organization and references in academic writing that I'm not used to" (SuS#24).
> "Teachers don't have to write this stuff. This APA style seems more appropriate for academia than for teachers" (SuS#3).
> "I consider myself a pretty good writer. As a future English teacher, I'm always writing my thoughts and stories. It's the organization of academic writing that kills me, there's no room for one's voice" (SuS# 21).

It is not clear whether participants had acquired those ideas from previous unsuccessful or poorly scaffolded academic writing assignments or as the outcome of a sequence of courses where reflective, unstructured writing was prioritized. At the end of a graduate program, a considerable number of the prospective and in-service teachers in the sample still viewed academic writing as a marginal element in the teacher's bag of tricks.

Misguided Beliefs?

The writing prompt taken immediately after the short essay survey stated:

> Pretend you are at your first job interview. A member of the interviewing committee asks: "Give us the main three reasons why you want to be a teacher." Please write a persuasive essay that addresses the committee member's question. You have about 45 minutes to complete this prompt.

Due to page limitations, the two prompt samples from students who manifested to be very comfortable with their writing skills but performed at the *unsatisfactory* level on the writing prompt are presented:

Sample #1

> I did not set out at the beginning of my college career to become a teacher: first I changed my major from physics to classics during my first term at the university as an undergraduate. I was taking a mythology course because it fascinated me to hear the same stories that fascinated me as a child and I was becoming dissatisfied by my physics course realizing that this was not for me, dreading specially the lab component. As I was looking into other majors, I realized that while I would go the physics/math section of the bookstore for study guides I would also visit the literature section because I liked it. I loved my mythology class and the topics proposed by the professor.
>
> My change also had to do with a girlfriend I had at the time. I was about to graduate with a major in classics and a minor in math and yet I had no idea of what I wanted for a career, all I knew is that it should be in my field, classics. At the time, the state I was living in and specially the city I was in had a need for Latin teachers. I thought nothing of this until my girlfriend, who was majoring in special education, suggested that I become a mentor at an elementary school and I did and enjoyed it.

This showed me that I love working with children. The final straw came when I worked at a residential institution for blind and visually impaired children. It was the best work I ever had. Even though the kids I worked with had other issues, I enjoyed going to work every day. I love working with children and students, love the subject matter, and want to share this love with others.

The essay above exhibited the problems described in the "unsatisfactory" category of the rubric: unclear purpose, problematic organization, coherence, and sentence structure, and points unsupported. A similar perspective emerges from the second sample below:

Sample # 2

The reasons why I want to be a teacher would be that teaching is rewarding, I continue to learn through teaching, and I love children. The reason why I chose rewarding as my first reason is because it is a job that you benefit from. You get watch children grow and learn from what you teach them. They are like an open book and you are the person filling in the pages. You can see a student 10 years later and they will remember you, for your lesson on Ancient Greece or what you helped them after school.

The second reason I said I wanted to work as a teacher was I keep learning through teaching, As a teacher you are constantly changing the way you teach. You are like a scientist doing an experiment. Also I believe you learn from your students, they are not only learning from you but they are teaching you. They might teach you to solve a math problem in a different way.

My third reason why I want to work as a teacher is because I love working with children. I think it takes a special person to want to become a teacher, not only wanting to be a teacher but a success at it. Although I listed three reason, there are many reasons why a want to become a teacher.

This second prompt exhibits a very repetitive, immature style of writing, with many shortcomings in terms of mechanics, sentence structure, and overall coherence given the intended audience.

The prompt's grade did not bear in the overall grade for the sections of the course in which it was administered. This may have led some participants to put marginal effort in its production. Some others might have internalized that the conversational--and sometimes confessional--strategies for learning about teaching used in many teacher education courses to promote a disposition for self-studying one's practice is the prevailing form of writing across teacher education programs.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings inform the debate on college literacy and highly qualified teachers in that they help interrogate assumptions about the writing performance of graduate students seeking to become teachers. While small sample studies like the one reported here help in identifying problems, they need to be followed by larger scale research. This study's implications for practice include (1) the need for assessing the artifacts that graduate students might be required to furnish for admission--such as on-site written responses to writing prompts rather than home-produced essays; and (2) the development of programmatic supports for student writing

throughout teacher education programs at all levels. Graduate students need to be assessed as having demonstrated basic skills (such as writing) in addition to profession-specific skills needed in their pursuit of a teaching license. Finally, an implication for policy stems from the fact that although all students in the sample had passed the state's teacher test that includes a thorough literacy component, a significant number of them (35 percent) had scored at the *marginal* and *unsatisfactory* levels on the writing prompt. Higher education institutions might wish to consider adding alternative measures of student performance in writing.

The disconnect between student beliefs about writing and actual student performance might indicate the need for rethinking the role of writing in both undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs, in order to improve the ways teachers approach writing as an individual activity and a professional tool for the classroom. Intensive writing courses that concentrate on different "forms" of writing that teachers need (grant writing, curriculum development, written communication with employers and parents, by way of email and paper correspondence) are proposed as part of teacher education programs at all levels.

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Appendix I

Rubric adapted from Howard, Ifekwunigwe, and Williams (2005):

Competent: describes papers whose writers clearly communicate their purpose effectively and efficiently with an introductory paragraph that presents the general impetus/rationale for the paper or assignment. The writers use specific detail to describe, analyze and reflect on the materials selected to build their case. The sentence structure is sophisticated and varied, and the diction precise. These writers get to the heart of the issues and provide connections for readers. They set a frame/rationale in their first paragraph and attend to all parts of the prompt. They understand that reflection is a reconsideration of the whole. In terms of development, they offer a good deal of specificity. Their diction is precise and sophisticated.

Satisfactory: describes competent writers who communicate their purpose with detail. One or more of the parts the writers were to address may be neglected or need development and