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Examining Pre-Service Literacy Teachers' Perceptions about Providing Writing Feedback to Elementary Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions about providing writing feedback to fourth-grade students. A group of 102 pre-service teachers participated in the study. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The findings revealed four critical components to giving feedback, the importance of scaffolding for the writer, and the vulnerability of pre-service teachers regarding writing. Implications for teacher educators include the importance of providing authentic writing and feedback opportunities for pre-service teachers. Additionally, pre-service teachers would benefit from being exposed to a strengths perspective in order to nurture their growth as proficient writers and writing teachers, thereby modeling how strong writing communities are built.

Keywords

pre-service teachers, writing preparation, strengths-based feedback, writing, literacy preparation

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INTRODUCTION

"Our responses to young people learning to write matter more than we can ever know" (Bomer, 2010, p. 17).

Much has been written about the ways in which we teach writing in our elementary classrooms. However, not as much attention has been directed at the perspectives each of us as teachers brings to teaching and responding to our learners' writing (Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Morgan, 2010). In this study, we explore the perceptions of pre-service teachers about responding to student writing. The study was a follow-up to a project which gave pre-service teachers the opportunity to provide writing feedback in the form of a letter to fourth-grade students, outlining the specific strengths and opportunities for growth within the student's writing sample. The purpose of this project was to develop pre-service teachers' understandings by using a conceptual model that provides strengths-based feedback to fourth graders' writing, geared at preparing them for the state's standardized writing test. The study had as its purpose to explore the perceptions our teacher candidates held about their own writing development and the process of providing elementary students with writing feedback. It seems a straightforward thing, this notion of responding to student writing; and yet, as with many aspects related to the messy yet important realm of writing, we bring to task our own experiences and biases. Our teacher candidates struggled with providing authentic writing feedback from a strengths' perspective. The study underlies the idea that it is important to explore the notion of how pre-service teachers are prepared to teach writing because it is upon these grounds that they gain important conceptual tools that will inform their teaching and develop the future generation of writers (Morgan & Pytash, 2014).

Beyond fundamentally equipping pre-service teachers with developing knowledge around essentials inherent in a conceptually sound writing program, this inquiry attempts to point out the integral connection to our teaching lives as a whole. We are reminded by Calkins (1994) "that as human beings we write to communicate, plan, petition, remember, announce, list, imagine," in order to "hold our lives in our hands and make something of them" (p. 8). The project and study reminded us of the need for writers of all ages and abilities to be nurtured, encouraged, and immersed in many opportunities to discuss writing, along with the idea that self-reflection is not only meant to be the purview for the writer, but for the teacher as well.

First, it presented us, as teacher educators, an opportunity to model authentic responses to student writing and our pre-service teachers with the chance to engage in real-world application of their teaching skills, which would impact student learning. This supports the assertion of Pytash, Testa, and Nigh

(2015) that pre-service teachers' real-world participation in teaching practices supports their self-efficacy and sense of preparedness as teachers of writing. Next, the project offered our pre-service teachers an opportunity to participate in a community project that continued a line of several other collaborations and projects in the particular school with which we paired our pre-service teacher candidates. Finally, the project gave fourth-grade students a connection to the University, which promotes support of the notion of a college-bound culture in the school at large.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Current State of Writing among Students in the Elementary Grade Levels

Writing is one of the most powerful tools we possess in order to convey information, thoughts, and concepts, as well as to inform our understanding of the world. In the words of Graham et al. (2018), writers use their abilities to "learn new ideas, persuade others, record information, create imaginary worlds, express feelings, entertain others, heal psychological wounds, chronicle experiences, and explore the meaning of events and situations" (p. 26). The current state of writing appears, on its surface, to indicate that we have made progress in this area; some researchers have examined this and report that more than 85% of the world population can now write (Swedlow, 1999). We can make an argument that while children usually possess the early foundation of learning to write in the home environment (Tolchinsky, 2016), most of their knowledge around becoming a proficient writer is learned in school. In the United States, approximately two-thirds of 8th and 12th grade students have demonstrated only partial mastery of grade-level writing skills (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2012). Even going back to earlier years, the National Commission on Writing (NCOW, 2003) deemed writing a skill that was hugely neglected in American schools. Research has shown that pre-service teachers' own experiences as students leave them with "conflicting or unexamined assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge about students, teaching, and schools" (Trier, 2006, p. 512).

In assessing the factors that impact the current state of writing, we know that genetics, biological functioning, and poverty do come into play (Graham et al., 2018); however, the type of instruction and the models used in writing instruction also significantly affect how children acquire the skill of writing (Graham, 2019). The influence and impact of teachers, and the perspective they adopt regarding writing instruction, is of prime importance, then, as it affects the ways in which young writers develop. A National Writing Project (2019) core belief is that effective teaching of writing has its roots in "theory and research, the analysis of practice, and the experience of writing," developed through "frequent

and ongoing opportunities for teachers to write and examine theory, research, and practice together systematically."

It makes sense, then, that one of the primary building blocks in this area involves examining some of the various ways we go about teaching writing. In a meta-analysis of 28 studies conducted by Graham (2019), regarding how writing is taught in today's classroom, it was found that some teachers provide developing writers with a program that is effective, research-based, and exemplary (Wilcox, Jeffrey, & Gardner-Bixler, 2016). However, this atmosphere of strong support, excellent modeling, and ample time to build a cadre of proficient writers is not typically what was found in the analysis of the aforementioned 28 studies (Graham, 2019). In each of the studies reviewed, there were some teachers who devoted an hour a day to allowing time for students to write and to providing strong writing instruction, but there were others, particularly at the elementary level, where teaching basic skills in the area of writing, such as handwriting, grammar, and spelling, were the focus. This emphasis on sub-skills comes at the cost of teaching students about the process-based nature of writing that allows us to develop fully in the area of writing. There is an indication that time is a key factor in the development of writing skills (Fletcher, 1993). Several studies point to the fact that most teachers do not devote enough time to allowing kids to practice writing and providing adequate writing instruction (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Fink-Chorzempa, 2003).

Overview of How Teachers are Prepared to Teaching Writing Among Students at the Elementary Grade Levels

Much of the research indicates that teacher educators have not always made the teaching of writing a priority in their preparation programs (Hillocks, 2006; Smagorinsky, 2010; McQuitty & Ballock, 2020). Few universities include writing methods courses in their curriculum (NCOW, 2003). At times, the emphasis on coverage of reading pedagogy overtakes the teaching of writing pedagogy; this can especially be true in reference to the early grades (Morgan, 2010). In survey results reported on by Myers et al. (2016), it was discovered that it is a rarity (28% of the time) that a stand-alone course on writing instruction is part of pre-service teachers' coursework. The authors go on to report that 72% of the participants surveyed indicated that instruction about writing was embedded in reading courses. The aforementioned gaps are not surprising. Writing is a complex process, and the teaching of writing is even more complex (Smagorinsky, 2010). Smagorinsky (2010) reminds us that pre-service teachers benefit most from courses that frame writing in "ways that feature the writer's ideas, the relational nature of writing conventions, the various writing processes

that writers employ with different tasks, and communities of readers" (p. 300). The studies examined point to the fact that there seems to exist a divide between the instructional approaches we advocate in methods courses and the writing instruction that ends up being implemented in elementary level classrooms. Morgan and Pytash (2014) point out that pre-service teachers frequently rely on their own experiences as students and the context of their current school environment, rather than implementing knowledge and practices learned in their methods courses.

A primary theme that emerged is that teacher educators felt that there was a lack of time for writing instruction, basically due to emphasis on reading instruction. This lack of enough time to teach writing in a systematic and intentional way caused many of the respondents to feel rushed in their writing instruction (Myers et al, 2016).

How Pre-Service Teachers View Their Ability, Capacity, and Confidence to Teach Writing

It is clear that universities serve a fundamental role in preparing pre-service teachers to teach writing in the elementary school classroom. Various studies have examined the ways in which pre-service teachers are prepared to bring writing instruction into their classrooms (Gallavan, Bowles, & Young, 2007; Gerla, 2010; McQuitty & Ballock, 2020; Norman & Spencer, 2005). In a review of the literature, Morgan and Pytash (2014) found some contrasting findings among the studies reviewed. Gallavan, Bowles, & Young (2007) found that among 112 early elementary, middle, and secondary pre-service teacher surveys, many pre-service teachers in the sample characterized themselves as poor writers. What is more, these same teachers were not sure how to actually go about teaching writing in an effective and impactful way. In contrast, Norman and Spencer's (2005) study found that most of the 59 teachers they surveyed espoused positive views of themselves when it came to writing; yet, many reported that they were not sure how to effectively go about teaching writing in a meaningful and authentic manner. Morgan and Pytash (2014) reported that over 90 percent of pre-service teachers identified writing as a 'fixed' trait, viewing writing as a talent that one does or does not possess.

As with many schematic representations we bring to the classroom, what pre-service teachers enter their college education with are not blank slates. They bring with them their own past experiences and notions of self-efficacy related to writing. What often makes the water even murkier is that some researchers have noted that few programs have "explicit strategies to help students to confront their own deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 305). Additionally, Baker (2011) stresses that a precondition of teachers

becoming competent evaluators of student writing is that they understand not only what it means to write, but also how to transfer that knowledge to their students. In regard, then, to how we go about teaching writing and what methods are most effective, a number of studies show that it is advantageous to learn to teach writing by working with students or utilizing actual students' writing samples (Fry & Griffin, 2010; Dempsey, PhtlikZillig, & Bruning, 2009; Moore & Seager, 2009).

Vulnerability as a Part of Writing

Graves (1993) writes, "When teachers have authentic voices, their students have them, too" (p. 3). The amount of writing conducted in the classroom is affected by the experience and self-efficacy of the teacher (Morgan, 2010). Consequently, "Preservice teachers need to rediscover writing and have multiple experiences as writers to draw upon when they are in the classroom. They need opportunities to write for themselves, to live the same curriculum and experiences they can later use with their own students" (Morgan, 2010, p. 352). Morgan's (2010) study with 42 pre-service teachers discovered that 60% of these pre-service teachers' initial essays indicated a lack of confidence in themselves as writers, and part of their writing vulnerability came from comments received from their own teachers. Morgan (2010) acknowledges the small size of her sample and limited duration of her study to one semester, but she also stresses the importance of encouraging pre-service teachers to investigate their past experiences, while considering new practices for their future students. Thus, any discussion of improving writing instruction includes teachers recognizing their own authentic voices in writing, which might begin with the need to "review our own histories as young writers receiving comments and grades on our nascent drafts" (Bomer, 2010, p. 13). In remembering those comments, preservice teachers can offer feedback on students' writing, while still honoring the work of the piece of writing (Locke, Whitehead, & Dix, 2013, p. 65). Teachers who engage in the process of writing along with their students can relate to students' feelings of vulnerability, sharing with them their own struggles and moments of inspiration they experience when they write (Bomer, 2016; Shrofel, 1991). "Teachers must feel competent in their use of these processes in order to effectively help their students become proficient writers" (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013, p. 151). Furthermore, Morgan (2010) points out that pre-service teachers will one day hold the same power over their own students, who may lack "the courage to speak out in writing, and to risk humiliation at the hands of a reader/evaluator" (Shrofel, 1991, p. 172), as those same teachers who once shaped their own understanding of writing.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which was formerly known as Social Learning Theory. Bandura (1989) posits that social learning occurs both directly and indirectly by observing others. There are four components of observational learning (Bandura, 1989). The first is *attentional processes*, in which participants are observing during modeling and taking note of what they learn. The second is *retention processes*, in which participants are actively internalizing the information learned. The third component, *behavior production processes*, is one in which participants are replicating the information learned through the modeling. The final component is *motivational processes*, in which participants are given reinforcement during the repetition of the behaviors learned.

Furthermore, we considered self-efficacy as an important tenet of this research. Self-efficacy is a person's belief that they can accomplish a goal (Bandura, Adams, & Beyer, 1977; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Our pre-service teachers often arrive in our classrooms with a low self-efficacy regarding writing (Morgan & Pytash, 2014). If not addressed during their undergraduate program, they may well continue to have low writing self-efficacy as teachers, which in turn impacts instruction, writing time, and students' own self-efficacy as writers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

We chose to use a qualitative design for this study. This enabled us to go in-depth and hear the voices of the pre-services teachers regarding giving writing feedback in their natural setting (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). The following research question was addressed: What are pre-service teachers' perceptions about providing writing feedback to fourth-grade students? Permissions were granted from our institution's review board to use archival data. We chose to use archival data, so that there was a clear delineation between the project and the study.

Context and Participants

The participants involved were 102 pre-service teachers from five classes at a mid-size university in the Southern region of the United States. There were nine male and 93 female participants. All grade levels, Early Childhood (EC)-6 certification (93/102), 4-8 certification (4/102), and 7-12 (5/102) certification were represented. Even though the 7-12 certification participants, enrolled in our courses, would not be giving feedback to fourth graders upon graduation, they

would use the same process when giving feedback to students in grades 7-12; therefore, we felt it was important to include their voices in the study. A majority (81.4%) of the pre-service teacher participants were taking their first literacy class in the education program.

Our pre-service teachers take three literacy classes for their degree plans; however, if they are majoring in Reading, they are required to take seven literacy classes. A majority of the pre-service teachers take the following courses;

- Children's Literature: Focuses on using high-quality literature for grades EC-8.
- Survey of Reading: Centers on theory and approaches from emergent to proficient readers.
- Literacy Methods: Addresses the application of theory to practice.

Researcher Roles

Our role as researchers were both as professors, our primary role, and that of researchers, secondary. We were professors for each of the courses where we provided weekly classes focusing on literacy instruction, theory, and application. During our role as researchers, we maintained two roles, first, an emic (insider's) perspective and, second, an etic (outsider's) perspective (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). When we participated in the writing process with our pre-service teachers during the teacher conference, we maintained an emic perspective, so we could fully engage in the writing process and workshop model. Later, when we analyzed the data, it was from an etic perspective. Maintaining both of these perspectives gave us an opportunity to embrace our dual roles. It is important to note that all data analysis was completed after the course ended and final grades were assigned.

Procedures

The writing project was divided into three phases, which took place over four weeks. Phase one was training pre-service teachers to identify strengths and areas of growth in student writing. Phase two included explaining the writing project to the pre-service teachers, designating partners, and distributing student papers to teams for analysis. Finally, phase three consisted of in-class peer revision and feedback, individual teacher conferences, publishing the final letter, and creating the folder for student feedback.

Phase 1: Training pre-service teachers

In phase one, we spent multiple class periods teaching pre-service teachers how to read student writing to identify strengths and areas of growth in each piece of writing (Appendix A). We utilized Fisher's and Frey's (2014) gradual release model: I do it, We do it, You do it together, and You do it on your own. Table 1 outlines the learning activities utilized to teach pre-service teachers how to identify strengths and areas of growth in a piece of student writing.

Table 1

Identifying Strengths and Areas of Growth Learning Activities

Gradual release phase	Learning activities
I do it	- The instructor discussed and analyzed student rubric. - The instructor showed what students need for their writing to be successful. - The instructor shared and discussed the structure of the grade four essay. - The instructor shared four pieces of student writing one at a time, so pre-service students would be able to see different examples. - The instructor modeled how to identify the strengths in each piece and how to identify the areas of growth.
We do it	- The pre-service teachers received a copy of a piece of student writing. - After reading over the piece several times, the instructor and students worked collaboratively as a class to identify strengths and areas of growth of the student paper.
You do together	- The class was divided into small groups. Each group received a student writing paper and a large piece of chart paper. - As a group, they read the paper, identified four strengths, and one or two areas of growth. - Each group shared and debriefed with the class.
You do on your own	- Each pre-service teacher received a piece of student writing to practice identifying strengths and areas of growth. - The instructor and students debriefed the following class session.

After working with pre-service teachers for multiple class periods on identifying strengths and areas of growth in student writing, we then shifted instruction to giving constructive feedback, which focused on the writing content, such as ideas, organization, and word choice, as opposed to merely edits, such as spelling and grammar. Table 2 identifies the learning activities used to work with pre-service teachers on how to provide effective feedback.

Table 2

Responding to Student Writing Learning Activities

Gradual release phase	Learning activities
I do it	- Pre-service teachers received a handout with examples of feedback for students (Appendix A). - Using the same four pieces of writing, the instructor modeled how to take each strength and provide comments to the student, with examples. - The process repeated for each identified area of growth.
We do it	Using the same paper, the instructor and pre-service teachers worked together as a class to provide comments for each strength and area of growth.
You do together	- The pre-service teachers gathered into their groups. - Using the same paper from the preceding week, they worked together to provide comments and suggestions for each strength and area of growth. - Each group shared and debriefed with the class.
You do on your own	- Pre-service teachers took their assignment and added in comments for each strength and area of growth. - The instructor and students debriefed the following class session.

Phase 2: Assignment

After pre-service teachers were trained to give constructive feedback, the writing project was explained (Appendix B). Each pre-service teacher worked with a

partner. Due to the number of fourth-grade students' writing papers, 140, each pair provided feedback for two to three student papers. Additionally, a sample letter was shared with pre-service teachers (Appendix C).

Phase 3: Peer revision, teacher conference, and publishing

The pre-service teachers met in groups to work on peer revising their letters to the students. After they were finished, each group met with the professor for a teacher conference. Finally, the pre-service teachers finalized their letters for publication and prepared the student folders. Each folder was personalized for the fourth-grade student receiving feedback (Appendix D).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from 102 pre-service teachers' pre- and post-reflections. Additionally, we collected notes from teacher conferences, drafts of each student letter with revisions and edits, and the final copy of the student letter. Reflective practice is part of our teaching methodology; therefore, participants were also asked to reflect in class both before and after the project. Participants were given up to an hour, so they could fully reflect on the questions asked.

Before the project, participants reflected on their own K-12 experiences, which was their pre-reflection. What kind of feedback did you receive on writing assignments? After the project, post-reflection, they reflected on the following questions: (1) Explain what you learned about writing/literacy as a result of doing this project. Be sure to extend your thinking and not just "name" what you learned; and (2) What was the most challenging part of completing this assignment? Please explain what was challenging, why you found it challenging, and how you solved the challenge.

We utilized content analysis to analyze the data from the students' reflections. The purpose of content analysis is to organize and elicit meaning from the data collected and to draw realistic conclusions from it (Allen, 2017; Patton, 2002). Additionally, we chose to use both manifest (literal) and latent (inferred) content analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Table 3 gives an example of a participant response and the two types of analysis utilized.

Table 3

Level of Analysis and Participant Examples

Level of Analysis	Code	Participant Examples

Manifest	Strengths perspective	"I learned to focus primarily on the strengths of the student's writing, and less on needs such as grammar and punctuation."
Latent	Small repertoire of writing strategies	"When it came to guidance on what to do to make it better, I struggled."

We also employed two types of coding: open and axial (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze the data and determine themes. Each researcher individually began coding each pre-service teacher's responses line-by-line to identify initial codes within the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Each researcher kept a codebook during the analysis (Saldaña, 2016), which helped to ensure the validity of the data analysis. After open coding, we utilized axial coding to identify the themes or categories that emerged from the data.

Next, we met as a research team and discussed each code and theme to ensure intercoder agreement amongst all three researchers (Saldaña, 2016). Once we reached 100% agreement, we created a common codebook and re-analyzed the data together for final analysis and percentages. Table 4 identifies the final themes and codes revealed during the data analysis.

Table 4

Final Themes and Codes from Data Analysis

Themes	Codes
Writing feedback is multilayered	● Content ● Strengths perspective ● Positive feedback ● Examples to support feedback
Writers must be met wherever they are on the continuum of writing proficiency	● Encouragement ● Connecting with the writer
Pre-service teachers have vulnerability around writing	● Unsure of what quality writing looks like ● Small repertoire of writing strategies

Findings

A total of 102 participant reflections were analyzed, and the following themes arose from data analysis. Theme 1: Writing feedback is multilayered; Theme 2: Writers must be met wherever they are on the continuum of writing proficiency; and Theme 3: Pre-service teachers have vulnerability around writing. Below we discuss detailed findings of each theme with supporting participant comments.

Writing Feedback is Multilayered

The data revealed these four critical components to giving feedback: (1) meaning is the most important part of student writing, (2) there are strengths in every piece of writing, (3) stay positive in the feedback, and (4) always use examples to support the feedback.

Forty-one percent of the participants expressed that the writer's meaning is the most important part of student writing. A participant stated, "As a future elementary educator, one must look through the grammatical mistakes and focus more on the quality and meaning behind their students' writings." Another pre-service teacher specified, "I learned to focus primarily on the strengths in the student's writing, and less on the needs, such as grammar and punctuation." Often pre-service teachers want to immediately point out the grammatical mistakes and spelling errors in a piece of writing, when we know that the heart of the paper lies in the substance of what is written. In addition, a participant stated, "Sometimes the spelling isn't the focus of the literacy but the story of what is being told is."

The second critical component identified was there are strengths in every piece of writing. Thirty-six percent of the participants communicated this in their reflections. A participant noted, "I learned the importance of providing concrete examples to students on what they did well in their writing. Doing so reinforces students to continue to build upon their strengths." As novice educators and writers, the strengths of a student piece of writing are not always evident, which makes it challenging to provide feedback from a strengths' perspective. Additionally, another participant expressed, "I learned that writing does not have to be perfect to be expressive. Sometimes just being able to express your feelings on paper is good enough."

The third critical component is to stay positive in the feedback. The data revealed that 27% of the participants' expressed the importance of this component. A participant voiced, "I learned how important it is to give positive feedback to students because it motivates them to keep writing." Additionally, a participant stated, "I learned that anytime you give students feedback, you must always start with the strengths/positives first. Giving students their strengths first

will allow you to also tell them their weaknesses with little to no harm." As future educators, it is important to build students' writing self-efficacy, and this can be done through the focus of positive reinforcement with writing feedback.

Finally, 27% of the participants indicated the need to always use examples to support feedback. A participant explained, "I think the feedback we gave to the three students can seriously make a difference in the writing, because we gave them examples of what was great and what needs some extra work." Furthermore, a participant expressed, "As a result of doing this assignment, I learned the importance of providing concrete examples to students and what they did well in their writing." Providing concrete examples is a powerful revision tool for all writers. It is important that our pre-service teachers build their supply of strong instructional strategies they can use with their future students.

Meet the Writer Where They are on the Continuum of Writing Proficiency

The data revealed that after the pre-service teachers participated in the writing feedback project, 59% expressed the importance of meeting the writer wherever they are on the continuum of writing proficiency. One participant noted, "Giving feedback requires much more than noticing the strengths and needs. You have to think about where the student is individually." Writing is differentiated in nature; therefore, it creates an opportunity to individualize instruction for students in order to best meet their needs. A participant expressed "that when you are looking at the writing you must assess it based off of where the individual is in their writing adventure." Finally, a participant stated, "Writing is personal; it grows as the writer grows."

In order to meet the writer where they are, teachers have to connect with the writer and provide encouragement. Sixty-three percent of the participants expressed the importance of providing encouragement to the writer. A participant noted that as teachers you have to "build upon student strengths" to help you connect with the writer. Additionally, a participant stated, "It's better to build their confidence with constructive criticism," which in turn helps connect with the writer. Encouragement is a foundational tool to help build writing self-efficacy. Finally, a participant indicated, "Each writer is going to have his/her unique style or way of writing, and we should help them embrace it."

Writing Vulnerability of Pre-Service Teachers

The findings indicated that 79% of the pre-service teachers have vulnerability around writing. This vulnerability in their own confidence as writers and in giving feedback stems not only from their past experiences, but also from their insecurities relating to a lack of literacy knowledge. A majority of the pre-service

teachers expressed that when they were in school, they received mostly feedback on grammar, spelling, and punctuation. A participant stated, "I always received my papers back marked up with red pen and highlighters. Mostly pointing out the things I did wrong." Additionally, a majority of the participants expressed that the feedback shifted from positive to negative, as they got older. A participant noted, "The feedback is much more constructive when younger, so that you are crafted to become a better writer." This vulnerability creates a barrier within pre-service teachers between their self-efficacy as a writer and as a future writing teacher.

Since a majority of the pre-service teachers (79%) are unsure what quality writing looks like, they have a difficult time identifying strengths and needs within a piece of writing. This lack of knowledge in literacy strategies makes it difficult for them to provide writing feedback. In addition, they have a small repertoire of instructional recommendations to draw upon, which creates a challenge. A participant asserted, "My partner and I found it challenging to word the letters, for example, we didn't know too much about the extent of the writer's vocabulary, aside from the writing. Therefore, it was difficult to decide on word-choice when writing about their papers." In addition, a participant voiced, "I wasn't sure if I was providing enough information for them to properly correct their papers. During class, the feedback seemed very intensive that it made me wonder if I could sound like that."

DISCUSSION

Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Writing

The findings indicate that, for the most part, applying explicit knowledge regarding providing robust feedback to students' writing is not something that we come into our teaching lives readily able to do. The four critical components: the importance of the message, a focus on strengths, staying positive in our written comments, and the use of examples are intricately connected to our own beliefs about writing and demonstrate the multilayered qualities of writing. Morgan and Pytash's (2014) review of literature supports this finding in which initially pre-service teachers view feedback as looking for grammatical and editing errors, but learned to craft meaningful feedback through a variety of activities. Thus, pre-service teachers need practice in this area (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013), using authentic writing samples (Fry & Griffin, 2010; Dempsey, PhtlikZillig, & Bruning, 2009; Moore & Seager, 2009).

As we moved through the different phases of this project, we had as our foci helping pre-service teachers identify who they perceived themselves to be as writers, identifying what constitutes strong writing, modeling instructional strategies to nurture good writing, and the many ways in which we foster a

community of writers. We sought to nurture these qualities, as opposed to just producing a class full of pre-service teachers who understood the various components and sub skills involved in writing instruction. As we progressed through the project, we could feel the shift in our pre-service teachers' perspectives from just seeing the project as an assignment to be completed to embracing the instructional methodologies of literacy best practice. This internal shift in accepting new instructional methodologies is what is needed to ensure that quality writing instruction is transferred to classrooms (Baker, 2011).

Appropriate Scaffolding

Scaffolding. We all need it. The data indicates that having participated in the process we framed for them, our pre-service teachers were privy to the type of model that we hope they consider adopting in their own writing communities. The power of the gradual release model lies in its ability to meet students where they are by including the presentation of best practice principles (exemplified by the seminar sessions, where we explored who we are as writers and what this means for our teaching), ample modeling (explicit ways to respond to student writing from a strengths perspective), guided practice (responding to sample student writing as a class and then in pairs), and independent practice (the writing of their own letters). Thus, feedback should begin by honoring what the writer is trying to say (Locke, Whitehead, & Dix, 2013).

One tension created by the types of support that were provided in the project was voiced by a student, "I don't think I can provide as much feedback to each student as what our professor gave us. And then I also think how much support is too much support." Indeed, this pre-service teacher has a point.

Writing Vulnerability of Pre-Service Teachers

It was clear that some of our students had not fully considered the "heart of the writer." That is to say, writers are vulnerable by the sheer virtue of having put their ideas down on paper. As researchers, we were reminded of this as the pre-service teachers struggled with their own writing vulnerabilities. Street (2003) found that preservice teachers' past experience with critical teachers, who emphasized correctness of form over meaning and voice in writing, impacted the pre-service teachers' developing writing identities. In this study, the researchers noted that several pre-service candidates bounced back and forth between what they knew from the formative schooling practices they had experienced and the somewhat "revised" writing lens they were being exposed to in class. This was evidenced in the writing they did to reflect upon the process, as well as from the comments made in class discussions.

Some students reluctantly looked beyond grammar errors and reached beyond their comfort level to focus on strengths. Breaking free of our own embedded experiences proved to be a hard road at times. We are reminded of the Norman and Spencer (2005) study in which pre-service teachers reported that they were unsure how to provide meaningful feedback.

One of the primary insights we came away with is that when we teach students about providing writing feedback, we are asking them to examine their own beliefs about writing. This was evident in class discussions that began with the query, "What do you remember about feedback on your own writing through the years?" Invariably, students would stress things like, "I remember the red marks all over my paper" or "I remember looking for at least one good comment." "I remember dreading the day we would get our essays back." For many students, the notion of searching for the strengths in a paper was a new concept. Even for those who had considered the idea, some were not sure how to go about explicitly writing to their students about it.

Implications and Recommendations

Ultimately, our teachers must feel that they are competent as writing teachers, and perhaps beyond that, as writers themselves (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013). Thus, part of our charge as teacher educators is to prepare pre-service teachers to nurture and gain that sense of proficiency as writers and teachers of writing. This experience helped pre-service teachers develop identities and authentic voices as writers. Additionally, there seems to be a chasm between what pre-service teachers are taught in methods courses and what the research describes as happening in elementary classrooms. Perhaps this points to the fact that we need stronger mentoring programs and models for coaching first year or beginning teachers (Morgan & Pytash, 2014).

We recommend that teacher educators explicitly teach strategies where we not only utilize, but model best practices, including the writing process. Equally important, we encourage teacher educators to work toward building writing communities within each of their literacy classes, where rigorous writing is honored, expected, and mentored. Thus, pre-service teachers need opportunities to reflect on their own histories as writers, explore best practices in teaching of writing, and participate in communities of writers to understand their future students as writers and to teach writing well in the classroom.

As teacher educators, we can carefully assess and evaluate just how much instruction is provided in our programs. Some research indicates that writing instruction is not a priority in programs (Hillocks, 2006; Smagorinsky, 2010). If our inquiry finds that the coverage we are providing is not ideal, we have the

opportunity to address the limited lens we are placing on the implementation of writing pedagogical tools.

Moreover, it is important to expose our pre-service teachers to student writing throughout each literacy course, so that they not only become comfortable reading and responding to student writing, but are also able to reflect upon ways to disrupt the "powerful traditions and policies that work to maintain static definitions of writing" (Bomer, Land, Rubin, & Van Dike, 2019, p. 202). In addition, we propose that teacher educators explicitly focus on the importance of giving quality feedback, which is authentic and focuses on the strengths of the writing. Fletcher (2017) points out the importance of strengths-based feedback, as he advises teachers of writing to begin by noting the writer's strengths, what he or she has done well. This notion echoes Culham (2018) as she advises teachers to "Look for early indicators of success. Notice what students are trying to do and praise it by naming it" (p. 84). As pre-service teachers practice giving and receiving quality feedback, this will potentially impact student learning in the classroom.

Finally, our educational system would also benefit from conducting studies looking at how writing is presented in methods courses. Also, another point of importance to consider might be cross campus research collaborations with multiple university sites working together. As Morgan and Pytash (2014) point out, these types of collaborations "provide more opportunities to contribute to our understanding about how best to prepare writing teachers and add to the public conversation about the role of university preparation in teacher education" (p. 33). As an extension of the aforementioned point, it might be useful to develop projects that provide systematic ways for pre-service teachers to be paired with elementary or secondary students. Much like in the project that we describe in this paper, university professors might build on the project to expand upon their instruction in writing pedagogy.

Limitations

We had multiple limitations for this study. First, the sample size was small; therefore, it would be difficult to generalize to a larger population. Additionally, the researchers relied on themes that emerged from the pre-service teachers' pre- and post-reflections. Finally, we were working with a quick turn-around time. We had approximately four class sessions to teach about quality feedback and the writing process, in order to get the feedback to the elementary students prior to their state assessment.

Parting Thoughts

Our pre-service teachers were provided the opportunity to provide authentic writing feedback to fourth graders at a local elementary school. This project was multifaceted, and the cross-collaboration between the school and the university were mutually beneficial. This project brought to mind for all of the researchers the beauty involved in developing and nurturing teachers who will go into the teaching of writing in our elementary classrooms. It reminded us that many of our pre-service teachers have never experienced the lovely part of writing feedback that focuses on the strengths in our writing as well as our opportunities for growth. Thus, our intention was to introduce pre-service teachers to an idealized world in which they see teachers of writing as those who see beyond writing as a series of steps to the understanding of writing as an ever-evolving process which develops as they write, read, and engage with other writers about their writing and reading (Shrofel, 1991). Bomer (2010) reinforces this notion by advising pre-service teachers to think back to the meaningful, encouraging comments offered about their own writing as students, when considering how to approach the writing of their future students. This experience helped pre-service teachers develop identities and authentic voices as writers, because quite simply, "we have to see ourselves as writers if we are to teach writing well" (Routman, 2005, p. 35). It also reinforced for us the fact that for our teachers to be able to provide appropriate and meaningful scaffolding, they must very often experience it first-hand. Finally, we are reminded of the fact that writers are vulnerable – no matter their age or stage.

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APPENDIX A

Writing Project
Responding to Student Writing

"Becoming good at assessing student writers, then, begins with each of us thinking hard about the kind of writers we want our students to become" (p. 15)
--Carl Anderson

Areas of Strength: As readers of student writing, our primary goal is to focus on meaning.

- What is the meaning (or topic) that the student has communicated to you?
- Did the writer focus his/ her topic on a central idea?

- Has the writer focused the writing on his/ her own experiences and thinking?
- What do you know about the writer's experiences based on the piece?
- Did the writer include a startling fact or pose an interesting question to capture the reader's attention?
- What are some details that the writer has given about the topic?
- Are there any particular phrases that stood out as you read the piece?
- Did the writer use any figurative language, like similes or metaphors?
- Did the writer's ideas flow and connect together with transitions?
- Overall, does the writer make sense?
- You might comment that the writer has used conventions well, if that is the case, but it should not be the main focus of your commentary.

Sample Comments:
- o "The images are so concrete I can close my eyes and see this."
- o "Your description of .... gives me goosebumps!"
- o "I like the way you used the word "sliver" in the first sentence. It really works!"
- o "Your first sentence made me really want to read more when you wrote, 'Woo! Look at that circuit!'"

Areas for Growth:
- What else do you know about this topic?
- What is the most important thing that you are trying to say in your writing?
- How do you want your reader to think or feel after reading this piece? Do you think you have done this?
- Does something not make sense? At the end, I am not sure what you want me to think about.... Could you add some details to make this clearer to me?
- Have you let the reader know why this is important to you?

Sample Comments:
- o I like when you wrote..., but could you tell me more about this, or explode a moment to make your idea more clear to the reader?
- o Can you think of an interesting fact or question to ask to capture the reader's attention at the beginning?
- o I want to know more about...Perhaps you might tell about how you felt when...

APPENDIX B

Writing Project: Growing Writers

Point to ponder: Katharine Bomer (2010) reminds us that *"We are so pressed to teach, correct, teach, correct that we often pass over what is there, in our rush to find what isn't there" (p. 92).*

Your Goal: *To find what is there!*

Objective: Given a fourth-grade writing sample, teacher candidates will write a letter to a student writer discussing four strengths and one or two areas of growth identified in that student's writing.

Learning Activities:
- **Practice with Writing Samples:**
  - Read the student paper to get a sense of what the student is trying to convey.

  - Try to overlook conventions (spelling, grammar, and punctuation, etc. errors) at this point.

  - Read the paper a second time and use post-it notes to name what the writer is sharing about the writing topic.

  - Look at the *Student Friendly Expository Rubric* and review what scores a 4 in writing and look for those qualities in the student's writing.

  - Think about *areas of strength.* Be specific. Give examples from the writing sample itself. Rather than just saying, "You used specific details," you might say, "I like the way you described the experiment about circuits by listing the components as 'a curcit board, a jumbo sized decell, lightbulbs, and wires,' so the reader actually knows what you are referring to in his/her writing. *(See Handout: Responding to Student Writing)*

  - Think about *areas for growth*. Be specific. You might suggest something the writer could try, like adding a quotation or another example to make the writing more powerful? You might say, "I noticed that you used the same sentence in both the first and last paragraph, '...I especially like the cool science experiments.' Could you

revise your last paragraph to state your main idea in different words?
(See Handout: Responding to Student Writing)

- **See Letter Template and Sample Letter**
- **Use the Letter Template to write a letter to the student sharing your thoughts on four strengths and one or two areas to grow that you noticed in the student's writing sample.**
- **Include a picture of yourself on the bottom right-hand side of your letter.**
- **Be sure to decorate the folder!**

APPENDIX C

Date

Student Name
Name of Elementary
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Justin,

Thank you for sharing your writing with me. I can tell that you enjoy playing basketball as a fourth grader.

In your essay about basketball, I like the way that you focused your writing on the single idea of playing basketball. You give some good reasons why you like basketball, such as, "it is an active sport," and "it is a more competitive sport." It sounds like you enjoy playing games when someone wins and someone loses. I can also tell that you like basketball because you write about both playing basketball games and shooting hoops, so it seems like you work on basketball skills when you are not playing a game. Your writing shows good word choice when it warns the player to catch the ball so "you don't get hit in the nose!" When I read those words, I can imagine what it might feel like to get hit in the nose.

Your essay begins and ends by telling the reader that you play basketball in the fourth grade. You might make it a little clearer to the reader that you like fourth grade because you get to play basketball. You might consider beginning your writing with an interesting fact about basketball or a quote that tells about something exciting that you did during a basketball game. Another idea is that

you could explode the moment by telling about a time when you played basketball and it became competitive.

I enjoyed reading about why you like being in the fourth grade. Keep writing about all the things that are important to you.
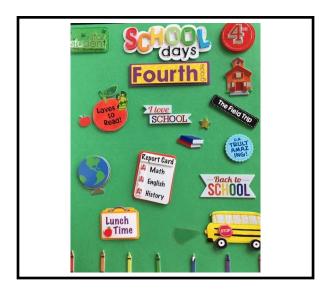
Sincerely,

[Include a picture of yourself]

_____

Susie Student

APPENDIX D

Examples of student folders.