

## **Our Lives as Writers: Examining Preservice Teachers' Experiences and Beliefs about the Nature of Writing and Writing Instruction**

**By Kimberly A. Norman & Brenda H. Spencer**

The ability to communicate through writing is central to school success and is essential for successful participation in the workplace and in a democratic society. Yet the quality of student writing in the United States continues to be of concern to educators and policymakers. The latest results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report card on writing indicate that in 2002, only 23% of the nation's fourth graders and 31% of the nation's eighth graders scored as proficient in writing (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). In addition, a recent report from the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and

Colleges (2003) argues that school reforms have not given adequate attention to writing and recommends, for one, improvements in teacher education in writing across all disciplines.

---

*Kimberly A. Norman and  
Brenda H. Spencer are  
assistant professors in  
the Department of  
Elementary and  
Bilingual Education at  
California State  
University, Fullerton.*

Despite such widespread concerns about writing proficiency, very few states require specific coursework in writing for teacher certification. In general, the emphasis in literacy instruction is on reading, with knowledge of writing pedagogy embedded within reading competency requirements for

teachers. While research supports the integration of writing and reading (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998), there is a great disparity in competency expectations and coursework emphasis between reading and writing (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). Thus, although there is much research in writing and writing instruction, the information may not be being sufficiently disseminated to preservice teachers in their certification programs. In California where we teach, for example, the majority of preservice teachers complete their teacher training in a one-year, post baccalaureate program. While state certification standards and assessments for preservice teachers acknowledge the importance of writing in learning, the emphasis is placed on the knowledge that teachers need to be effective teachers of reading. Therefore, preservice teachers generally receive much more instruction in reading theory and practice than in writing.

When they enter teacher education programs, teaching candidates have had numerous opportunities to write both in and out of school and have been exposed to a range of pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing. These experiences have not only shaped their skills as writers and their attitudes toward writing, but also their beliefs and values about the very nature of writing, writing development, and writing instruction. From a sociocognitive perspective (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978), learning is influenced by the values, beliefs, and experiences that exist within the larger community. Thus, the twelve or more years of educational experience that preservice teachers bring into their professional preparation programs have formed their beliefs and values about teaching and learning. From the students' vantage point, they have observed, critiqued, and appropriated the ways of knowing, doing, and being (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lortie, 1975; Rogoff, 1990). Evidence suggests that even if these belief systems are implicit, they serve to filter new information as candidates attempt to make sense of curricula that may or may not mirror their personal experiences. If beliefs remain unexamined, new learning afforded by preparation courses may not influence their views or be applied to teaching contexts (Britzman, 1986; Lortie, 1975). Thus, preservice teachers' histories influence what and how they learn in formal coursework (Hollingsworth, 1989; Kagan, 1992; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Pajares, 1992) and the pedagogical decisions they make in the classroom (Clark & Peterson, 1986).

Since instruction in writing theory and pedagogy for preservice teachers is often limited, it is essential that teacher educators provide learning experiences that are supported by research in effective teacher preparation and make maximum impact in the time available. One of the experiences that has been identified as holding promise for effective teacher preparation is having candidates examine their personal theories and beliefs in relation to theory and practice (Pajares, 1992; Worthy & Prater, 1998). Personal histories or autobiographies serve to make explicit and external one's ideas, theories, and beliefs about teaching and learning (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; O'Brian, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). In literacy education, personal histories have been employed to

examine the factors that influence preservice teachers' attitudes toward reading (Bean, 1994; Bean & Readence, 1995), the effects of specific instructional approaches, such as reading and writing workshops on teachers' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers (Gerla, 1994), and the relationship between teachers' attitudes toward reading and writing and their confidence in teaching literacy (Mahurt, 1998).

In our literacy methodology courses, we have incorporated the use of autobiographies for two reasons. First, as instructors, the histories provide a window into our students' prior knowledge and experiences, which facilitates our ability to foster candidates' personal connections with course content and to identify specific areas of need. Second, the process fosters our students' critique of and reflection upon their past experiences, and facilitates ongoing reflection on and (re)interpretation of the experiences and belief systems previously acquired as they progress through the program (Butt, Raymond, & Yamagishi, 1988). In this article, we report a study that used autobiographies to examine the beliefs and experiences of preservice teachers about writing and writing instruction. The following research questions were examined: (a) what are preservice teachers' perceptions of themselves as writers? and (b) how do people and experiences shape preservice teachers' views of writing instruction and learning to write?

## **Method**

Qualitative methods were employed to examine preservice teachers' views of themselves as writers. The writing histories comprise one component of a broader research project being carried out through collaboration with a cadre of teacher educators at our university. This project explores preservice teachers' views of themselves as literate adults — readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists and historians — and traces the ways those views influence their instruction.

## **Participants**

Fifty-nine preservice teachers from two cohorts at a large comprehensive regional university in southern California participated in the study. Fifty-three were females, with 69% identified as Caucasian, 19% Hispanic, and 12% Asian. All of the participants had earned their bachelors degrees in fields other than education (e.g., child development) and were enrolled in a two-semester, fifth-year post-baccalaureate elementary teacher education program. The program included two semesters of coursework on literacy. In the first, students studied the teaching of reading. They were concurrently enrolled in mathematics methods, educational foundations, and ethnic and cultural diversity methods courses for ten weeks, completed 90 hours of fieldwork, then five weeks of full-time student teaching in local public elementary schools. The data for this study were gathered at the beginning of the second semester literacy course, where candidates examined the

**Data Source and Analysis**

The composition of an autobiography of participants' lives as writers, an assignment in the second semester course, was aimed at encouraging preservice teachers to become more conscious of the roles writing plays in their lives, their personal writing development, and the influences (e.g., people, events, pedagogical practices) on their development. Examining their implicit beliefs about writing and writing instruction became an ongoing process as they studied writing development and instruction.

During the first session of their language arts methods course, before receiving formal coursework in writing, preservice teachers participated in prewriting activities to activate their recall of previous experiences as writers. They then composed their autobiographies and submitted them one-week later. Prewriting activities included the reading of "A Writer's Story" (Cramer, 2001), a personal anecdote in which the author vividly recounts his writing process and an experience that helped shape his image of himself as a writer. All were encouraged to recall as far back in their own lives as possible, to draw from in- and out-of-school experiences, and to consider the people and experiences that were influential, whether positive or negative.

Students' compositions focused on a particular content, yet took different forms. Some provided chronological accounts from early childhood to the present, while others focused on critical incidents. While the assignment elicited a particular response, students were encouraged to respond uniquely to their own experience. The varied responses show that they chose a form that they thought best told their stories.

The autobiographies were analyzed through grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1992) to identify core categories. The two authors and an undergraduate research assistant read each autobiography individually, and segmented the text into phrases, sentences and paragraphs, and wrote analytical notes and summaries to identify issues and topics in the text. We each made a list of identified themes and discussed the categorization of candidates' comments. Analysis resulted in the following salient categories/themes: (1) participants' views of self as writer, (2) influences of other people and events, and (3) views of writing, writing development, and writing instruction. Subsequently, we developed a coding scheme that was used across all the data. The group discussed discrepancies until a shared agreement was reached.

## **Results**

Most (91%) of the preservice teachers had constructed views of themselves as writers that can be categorized as either positive or negative, with far more participants viewing themselves positively as writers (58%) than negatively (33%). The ways in which participants viewed themselves as writers was situated in larger, more general understandings of their notions about the nature of writing and writing development. Four different themes emerged from the analysis of the preservice teachers' autobiographical responses that represent different facets of their views about the nature of writing, writing development, and writing instruction. These are: (1) personal/creative writing is the most meaningful and interesting kind of writing; (2) teachers have both positive and negative effects on writing identity; (3) encouraging writing development is different from teaching writing; and (4) the importance of writing instruction is influenced by beliefs about the nature of writing. Each theme, along with supporting evidence, is described below. In reading the preservice teachers' comments and perceptions, it will be apparent that although each theme is discussed separately, there are many intersections between and among the themes.

### ***Personal/Creative Writing is the Most Interesting and Meaningful Type of Writing***

In the 59 autobiographies analyzed, 40 preservice teachers specifically mentioned their views on different genres of writing. The majority of them (63%) expressed a preference for personal/creative types of writing (e.g., stories, poems, songs, diaries and journal writing). Preservice teachers engaged in this type of writing not only in response to school assignments but also as literacy activities that were, and still are, part of their daily lives. For example, Kelly described how she used writing to record events in her life and to reflect on their meaning:

I analyzed my dreams and kept track of my life in diaries and occasional short essays to myself about what my life was like in the present time.

Similarly, Trang described her appreciation of the therapeutic value of journal writing. Others wrote of the personal satisfaction they received from writing poetry and stories to share with family and friends.

Many of these preservice teachers viewed writing at school as another context in which to engage in the kinds of writing they enjoyed at home. At school, as at home, they appreciated the outlet that creative/personal writing provided for them to express their ideas, to engage in the creative process, and to reflect on their lives. At school, they regarded free choice writing opportunities and journal writing assignments as highly motivating and meaningful because they provided opportunities to express themselves in the personal ways that they valued.

In contrast, only 13% of those who gave views on different types of writing

### *Our Lives as Writers*

---

indicated a preference for analytic/expository writing such as reports, essays and research papers. Twenty-four percent indicated that they liked both personal/creative and analytic/expository writing. Interestingly, when the preservice teachers who highly valued personal/creative writing mentioned analytic/expository writing assignments they valued, they tended to be ones in which they could express their own ideas and opinions or ones in which they could relate a personal experience. In her autobiography, Erica reported that in college she changed majors so that she could change from writing papers that she found boring and tedious to “writing about myself, my experiences, and things that interest me.” Thus, the nature of what they found satisfying in writing, the opportunity to use writing for introspection and to express personal experiences and ideas, remained consistent across genres.

#### **Teachers Have a Powerful Effect on Writing Identity**

In the 59 responses, 90% of the preservice teachers acknowledged that influential people in their environment had an impact on their self-perceptions as writers. They described various people - teachers, parents, friends, and professional writers — who at different points had played a positive or negative role in the construction of their identities as writers. Because they mentioned former teachers as having influenced their writing identities far more than any other groups (80% credited teachers), we have focused our analysis on their beliefs about the influence of teachers.

While a few of the preservice teachers described one experience with a teacher in depth, the majority made mention of a number of teachers who had at different points in their schooling had an impact on their writing. All but two preservice teachers considered their elementary teachers as positive influences on their development as writers. They characterized these teachers as enthusiastic, supportive, and encouraging. They appreciated teachers who found their writing worthy of praise. In addition, they approved of the writing curriculum that the teachers implemented. In particular, the preservice teachers singled out the many opportunities they were given to write in their journals and to choose their own writing topics as being relevant, meaningful, and interesting. For example, in her autobiography, Carrie credited her fourth-grade teacher for helping her develop her positive concept of herself as a writer:

Much of this enthusiasm was enhanced through my teacher. She did not criticize me for wanting to write a story about a mall. She encouraged me and helped me develop my paper into a complete, exciting story.

Essie also made reference to the positive impact that teachers have when they give assignments that students find relevant:

Then I received the assignment that changed my thinking of myself as a writer. I wrote a booklet on something I knew and loved, Fantasyland. . . This assignment taught me to love my work. I can have fun with writing and be creative.

The two preservice teachers who were critical of their elementary teachers believed that the teachers discouraged interest in writing because they put more emphasis on the conventions of writing than on the content. One of these preservice teachers wrote: "I felt put down (by the teacher) because I hadn't crossed all my t's or dotted all my i's."

There was much more variability in how preservice teachers evaluated their teachers at the secondary level (junior high and high school) and in college. The reports were more evenly divided between teachers who had a positive impact and those who had a negative impact. Preservice teachers who believed that their secondary and college teachers had a positive influence described them as having very similar characteristics as the elementary teachers they found effective. Like their elementary counterparts, they were seen as encouraging, supportive and caring. Preservice teachers also indicated their appreciation of secondary and college teachers who found elements in their writing deserving of praise. For example, Maria wrote about how a relationship she developed with a college professor helped her to have confidence in her writing. She noted, "After class I would spend time with her reviewing my work and talking about the influences that she had on her (own) writing. She praised me as well as my writing." In addition, as the preservice teachers moved through the secondary years and into college, they continued to appreciate writing activities such as journal writing, creative writing, and other assignments that provided them many opportunities to express their ideas and to write about their lives.

Teachers at the secondary and college levels who were perceived as having negative effects were characterized as insensitive, critical, uncaring, and ineffective. Some described events in which they believed that they had been publicly humiliated because their writing had not met the teacher's standard. Sean wrote, "I can still envision (his teacher) mocking my lack of syntactic knowledge. Needless to say, I did not discover myself as a writer in junior high either." Katie had a similar experience:

She (her teacher) said that there was one paper that was a perfect example of an incorrect paper. This paper turned out to be my paper. She had made copies of my paper for each individual in the class. I was mortified and humiliated.

In addition, many of the preservice teachers believed that these teachers held notions of writing that were in conflict with their own. In her autobiography, Karen described how she disagreed with her high school teacher's view of how to respond to literature:

I had a teacher who thought that when you wrote about literature you had to write about what he thought was in the piece of literature. There was only one interpretation and that was my teacher's interpretation.

This is in contrast to her views of her college literature instructor. She reported that her college instructor would accept any ideas as long as they were supported. Her

### *Our Lives as Writers*

---

appreciation of this teacher's approach to responding to literature can be seen in the following quote: "Needless to say I was overcome with joy because I did not have to write about trying to support ideas that I did not agree with. I could now write about my interpretations and my ideas."

Likewise, Liza challenged her college instructors' views of her writing:

Although I was never fully content with the essays I produced, my instructors always told me that I was too wordy. . . . What they called wordiness, I called descriptive and meaningful.

Others felt that these teachers overvalued correct form and conventions. For example, Lucy wrote:

There are a thousand compliments one can pay to anyone's writing if you look hard enough. It doesn't matter if that a student can't spell or has bad grammar, what's important are the ideas being put on paper.

Overall, preservice teachers saw as positive influences teachers who cared about their ideas and encouraged them as writers. They responded positively when they had teachers whose views of writing and writing development agreed with their own. They were less responsive to teachers whom they felt were judgmental and uncaring and whose views of writing conflicted with their own.

#### ***Encouraging Writing Development is Different from Teaching Writing***

While this theme is closely related to the previous one on influential teachers, we address it separately because the preservice teachers saw this as such an important issue in their writing development. The majority of preservice teachers made a distinction between classroom environments that encouraged and motivated them to write and environments where the focus was on teaching writing.

*Encouraging writing.* Preservice teachers identified a number of elements that they believed encouraged and motivated them as writers. Two of the elements have already been discussed. One of these was a writing curriculum that provided many opportunities to write using free choice writing and other writing tasks that provide outlets for creativity and for personal reflection. Another was having a caring, supportive teacher. In addition to these, receiving general praise or affirmation such as good grades, positive teacher comments (good work, great story) and showcasing of work were seen as important in building self-confidence. Over half of the preservice teachers reported receiving this type of general praise, and 81% of those who received it believed that it was instrumental in shaping a positive view of themselves as writers. For example, Helen addressed how showcasing her work helped her to believe in her writing ability:

I can still remember how proud I was of my first piece of poetry when she (her teacher) put it up on the board.



Evan made a similar point when he commented, “It is funny how praise will boost your confidence and will only make you want to work harder.”

However, there were some preservice teachers (18%) who received general praise but found it problematic. They had difficulty in defining just what there was about their work that merited praise. Sharon described an incident in which she won a prize for a story that she had written without much thought. She felt that winning the prize was meaningless because she “wasn’t even clear about what constituted good writing.” Kendell had a similar reaction to receiving non-specific feedback from her teachers. She remarked:

It (writing) is a mystery to me. Writing is something that I can do, and often times I will read something that I wrote years before and think, “Did I write that?”

*Teaching writing.* There was much more variability in how preservice teachers viewed an environment in which the teacher provided writing instruction. Of the 68% who described the effect of writing instruction on their views of themselves as writers, 34% believed that it had played a positive role. These preservice teachers described how corrective feedback and instruction in using descriptive language and brainstorming techniques helped them grow as writers. For example, Joan wrote about a college instructor who told her group that they needed to work on their writing styles:

(The teacher) wanted to teach us a different style of writing that she said would challenge us. I remember that challenge and had the hardest time adjusting. I would do poorly on assignments but I was being taught a valuable lesson. . . I can always do better and improve.

Josh also noted the positive effect that instruction had on his writing. He wrote that learning brainstorming techniques “allowed ideas and emotions to flow from my mind. . . This was the first time I felt as though I was good enough to be called a writer.”

In contrast, 48% of the preservice teachers who described writing instruction, reported that receiving instruction and corrective feedback and suggestions about their writing had a negative effect on their self-concepts as writers. This was especially true when the feedback dealt with grammar, syntax, or spelling, but also occurred when comments were made about word choice, clarity, and support for ideas. Sophia was one of the participants who responded negatively when she received corrective feedback:

My papers with positive feedback were replaced by papers needing revisions and improvements . . . My enjoyment and confidence in writing was changed to viewing writing as a chore.

Candice expressed even more strongly her dislike of instructional techniques for improving writing:

My pen did not have instructions for writing, criteria, grammar, and spelling

### *Our Lives as Writers*

---

checks. My pen only held a creative mind that wanted to be expressed... (T)here were too many rules, and too much criticism and no creative writing. Writing never became fun for me again.

#### **Beliefs About the Nature of Writing Ability Affect What It Means To Be a Competent Writer**

We found that 91% of the preservice teachers' views about writing ability could be classified as either fixed — writing is a gift or talent one either has or doesn't have — or malleable- writing is a craft that can be improved with instruction and corrective feedback.

More than half (63%) of the preservice teachers described writing ability as having characteristics that we classified as a view of writing as an inherent talent or gift. These preservice teachers associated being a good writer with the ability to think of ideas to write about or being the first ones to get finished with their writing assignment. They tended to view grades and other feedback as confirmation of whether or not they could be considered “good” writers. For example, Erica wrote that she considered herself a good writer because “I was always an imaginative child with some strange ideas and easily pictured things that were described, so writing came fairly easy.” Jodie believed that winning a prize identified her a good writer: “When I was in the fifth grade, I won a second place writing prize... I was very proud of myself and I knew right then that I was a writer.” Janice indicated that she got her writing talent from her dad.

Those in this category who viewed themselves as poor writers often indicated that they found getting their ideas down on paper to be hard work. For example, Warren did not consider himself a writer because “writing for me comes at a great struggle... (I)t takes me a considerably long time to transfer my thoughts into smooth flowing sentences...” Others in this group reported that they had received negative feedback which they interpreted as confirming they were not writers. Rosie wrote that she did not consider herself to be a writer because she received a paper from her second grade teacher with red marks and the comment, “writing is hard work.” She stated:

I interpreted the red marks and the comment as an insinuation that I did not possess the gift of writing and that becoming a writer would be a daunting task. From that moment the dream (of becoming a writer) was over.

It is striking that when preservice teachers wrote about writing instruction and corrective feedback, none of the preservice teachers who viewed writing as a talent or gift described writing instruction and corrective feedback in a positive light. Instead they tended to express the belief that the primary role of the teacher is to establish a supportive environment that provides many opportunities for students to express their creativity or their ideas. For example, Jodie who was quoted above regarding how winning a writing prize confirmed her membership in the writing community also stated:

Today, I don't have very good grammar, punctuation, or spelling skills, but a little encouragement from a couple of teachers have made the difference. . . As a teacher I want to encourage every child's writing like I was encouraged. I will teach them that mistakes happen and they are OK. Through practice and praise, I believe they can become comfortable in their own writing.

In contrast, 36% of the preservice teachers viewed writing as malleable. That is, they expressed the view that effective writing instruction and hard work can improve writing ability. Bianca related how instruction in creative writing motivated her and helped her grow:

In the sixth grade, for the first time I saw that things could be written and expressed in multiple ways. We had been given direct instruction in creative writing and I was really enlightened. Instead of saying "the box is small, red, and shiny" I could say "the small box dazzles with red beauty." This was exciting to me and I can remember teaching my little sister what I had learned.

Preservice teachers in this category sometimes received poor grades and criticism but instead of being discouraged by it, they were challenged and felt that with instruction and hard work they could improve. For example, Eudora recalled how frustrated she was by the "C" grades she received on papers in the beginning of her college composition class. But as the semester continued her grades improved and she received an "A" in the class. She attributed her improvement to the training and encouragement she received from her instructor:

During the course of the semester, my professor provided many opportunities for peer review sessions and the discussion of opposing viewpoints. These sessions combined with my professor's encouraging comments and constructive criticism brought me to a new level as a writer.

Susana also acknowledged the role of hard work and instruction in becoming a writer. In this quote she discusses the impact that her 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher had on her as a writer:

She emphasized the importance of writing to me and gave me lots of practice. . . She spent a lot of time teaching how to write; she took writing seriously and had high expectations. . . I really applied myself and did my best to earn A's from her, which was not an easy thing to do.

Preservice teachers who viewed writing as malleable recognized the value of instruction. As seen above, some credited instruction for improving their writing while others believed that ineffective instruction was a lost opportunity for writing development.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

The texts preservice teachers produced to represent their lives as writers provide a window into their views about writing, themselves as writers, and writing

---

### *Our Lives as Writers*

---

instruction. Consistent with the findings that views about teaching and learning are formed before entering a program (Lortie, 1975), we found that they entered our credential program with beliefs about their own capabilities as writers and views about how writing should be taught.

Four themes emerging from this study are: (a) positive self-concepts, (b) preferences for personal/creative writing, (c) salient characteristics of effective teachers and instruction, and (d) an interplay between views of the nature of writing and the perceived value of writing instruction. Most preservice teachers held positive views of themselves as writers and possessed skills and dispositions considered productive in the writing literature. For example, they enthusiastically conveyed the role that journaling and the composing of poetry, short stories, and other forms of personal/creative expression has played and continues to play in their lives. Former teachers who used positive reinforcement to motivate were consistently credited with building preservice teachers' positive self-concepts. Additionally, they held that writing instruction should provide students with choice, that writing assignments are more meaningful when connected with students' interests and backgrounds, and writers and their writing should be supported with positive feedback. The powerful role of teachers and their instructional decisions in shaping writers' self-perceptions was consistently recognized across the participants.

While candidates possess skills and dispositions supported in the writing literature, they also express beliefs that reflect historic tensions that exist between an approach to writing that focuses on process writing with its emphasis on student choice, meaning, and ideas, and more formal approaches that focus on writing as a craft that can be taught (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). While valuing writing, preservice teachers were noticeably less positive when describing their experiences with expository or analytical writing. While some preservice teachers conveyed frustration with unclear or absent instruction, many communicated a resistance to adhering to convention and form, a negative view of instruction, and expressed a disinterest in the topics assigned, particularly as they moved through the upper elementary and secondary years.

A surprising number of preservice teachers in this study view writing as fixed, and explain that "good" writing is a talent that only a few possess. These same candidates did not view instruction as having a positive influence on writing development. Consequently, their vision of effective teaching of writing centered around providing students with opportunities to write and encouraging writers and their writing.

As preservice teachers reflected on the qualities of writing, particularly those who view writing as fixed, they used general terms when describing the features that made a strong writer or piece of writing, and at times noted that they were unsure of the characteristics of quality writing.

This study has implications for teacher education. First, understanding preservice teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions about writing and writing develop-

ment prior to instruction provides teacher educators with valuable information about their students that can be used to shape course content and field-based experiences. This is especially important given the disparity between methods coursework time devoted to teaching reading and that devoted to teaching writing. If teacher educators are to use the time devoted to writing instruction optimally, it is essential that they consider the influences of preservice teachers' entering belief systems on what and how they will learn about writing instruction in their methods courses and in their field experiences.

Teacher educators should encourage preservice teachers to become aware of the intersection of personal history and the larger educational context and to engage in ongoing reflection as they move through the course and their field experiences (Pajares, 1992; Worthy & Prater, 1998). In our classes candidates made connections to their own histories throughout the term. They compared and contrasted fieldwork experiences with their own experiences and with those of their peers.

Second, the results highlight the essential role that teacher education programs can play in helping candidates develop a theoretical framework for thinking about writing development and instruction. Such a framework should help candidates accommodate the tension between more formal aspects of writing and the importance of ideas, meaning, and individual writing preferences. But theoretical understandings are not enough. In addition, preservice teachers need to be taught skills and strategies to put their theoretical understandings to work in the classroom. Unless teacher education programs provide preservice teachers with tools for dealing with these issues, they will continue to struggle with them as they develop their own classroom writing programs (Grossman, Valencia, Evans, Thompson, Martin, & Place, 2000). Grossman and her colleagues found that beginning teachers were still grappling with balancing the need for student ownership and attention to structure and craft in the teaching of writing well into their second year of instruction.

Preservice teachers need experiences in the classroom that provide them with opportunities to put what they have learned into practice. However, there can be challenges in integrating new approaches, particularly in field experiences that do not support innovations (Grossman et al., 2000). We have found great variability in field experiences of our students. Some candidates see course content in action in the classrooms. Others see writing curricula that focus on assigning writing, teacher editing, and writing in journals. Given the emphasis on reading instruction candidates tend not to see very much instruction in writing. Because so little time is spent on writing instruction in many classrooms, candidates often have to ask for time during student teaching to complete their required writing instruction assignments.

One approach that we have found to be valuable in both addressing the constraints of the classroom and in supporting preservice teachers' application of writing concepts and skills is participation in on-going writing conferences with students from their fieldwork or student teaching classroom. The assignment is designed to encourage preservice teachers to closely examine the ways in which

### *Our Lives as Writers*

---

they respond to writers and their writing. Multiple one-on-one conferences provide opportunities for candidates to respond to children verbally and in writing and to engage in conversation. Required reflections following each conference and the establishing of writing goals prior to the next student conference raise candidates' consciousness of the messages they send to students regarding their writing performance, and how the feedback may influence motivation and growth. Most candidates experience success in applying principles for writing instruction and assessment, but at times, find themselves employing the same strategies (e.g., "marking up" the paper, dominating the conversation as well as the pen) they deplored as students. In these instances, the reflection component is critical as candidates are encouraged to analyze the reasons behind their responses and to identify alternative approaches for future interactions.

In conclusion, writing histories are of value to both teacher educators and the preservice teachers who write them. By understanding the nature of the beliefs about writing their students hold, teacher educators can more effectively meet the needs of their students both in the classroom and in the field. Class content and fieldwork assignments can be designed to help students make connections between their beliefs and research and practice in writing and to develop responses to challenging issues in writing instruction. Furthermore, there is great value in having preservice teachers critically examine their own experiences and beliefs and the beliefs of their peers so that they understand how their personal beliefs and experiences influence their learning and their actual teaching practices. This reflective stance toward learning and teaching encourages teacher candidates to look beyond their own perspective and to be more open to alternative approaches that they might have rejected or not had the confidence to try.

### **References**

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press.
- Bean, T. W. (1994). A constructivist view of preservice teachers' attitudes toward reading through case study analysis of autobiographies. In C. K. Kinzer & D. J. Leu (Eds.), *Multidimensional aspects of literacy research, theory, and practice: Forty-third yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 370-379). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- Bean, T. W., & Readence, J. E. (1995). A comparative study of content area literacy students' attitudes toward reading through autobiography analysis. In K. A. Hinchman, D. J. Leu, & C. K. Kinzer (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy research and practice: Forty-fourth yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 325-333). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- Britzman, D. P. (1986). Cultural myths in the making of a teacher: Biography and social structure in teacher education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56, 442-456.
- Butt, R., Raymond, D., & Yamagishi, L. (1988). Autobiographic praxis: Studying the formulation of teachers' knowledge. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 7, 87-164.

- Clark, C. M., & Peterson, P. L. (1986). Teachers' thought processes. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 255-296). New York: Macmillan.
- Cramer, R. L. (2001). *Creative power: The nature and nurture of children's writing*. New York: Longman.
- Gerla, J. K. (1994). A descriptive analysis of preservice teachers' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas A & M University.
- Grossman, P.L., Valencia, S. W., Evans, K., Thompson, C., Martin, S., & Place, N. (2000). Transitions into teaching: Learning to teach writing in teacher education and beyond. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 32, 631-662.
- Hollingsworth, S. (1989). Prior beliefs and cognitive change in learning to teach. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26, 160-189.
- Holt-Reynolds, D. (1992). Personal history-based beliefs as relevant prior knowledge in course work. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29(2), 325-349.
- Kagan, D. M. (1992). Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 62, 129-169.
- Knowles, J. G., & Holt-Reynolds, D. (1991). Shaping pedagogies through personal histories in preservice teacher education. *Teachers College Record*, 93(1), 87-113.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mahurt, S. F. (1998). Writing instruction: University learning to first-year teaching. In T. Shanahan, F. V. Rodriguez-Brown, C. Worthman, J. C. Burnison, & A. Cheung (Eds.), *Forty-seventh yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 542-554). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges. (2003). The neglected "R": The need for a writing revolution. Retrieved July 21, 2003, from <http://www.writingcomission.org>
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2002). NAEP writing results. Retrieved July 21, 2003, from <http://www.nces.ed.gov/reportcard/writing/results2002>
- National Writing Project, & Nagin, C. (2003). *Because writing matters: Improving student writing in our schools*. San Francisco: Josey Bass.
- O'Brian, D. G., Stewart, R. A., & Moje, E. B. (1995). Why content literacy is difficult to infuse into the secondary school: Complexities of curriculum, pedagogy, and school cultural. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 30, 307-332.
- Pajares, F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62, 307-332.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wharton-McDonald, R., Pressley, M., & Hampston, J. (1998). Literacy instruction in nine first-grade classrooms: Teacher characteristics and student achievement. *Elementary School Journal*, 99, 102-109.
- Worthy, J., & Prater, S. (1998). Learning on the job: Preservice teachers' Perceptions of

*Our Lives as Writers*

---

participating in a literacy tutorial program. In T. Shanahan, F. V. Rodriguez-Brown, C. Worthman, J. C. Burnison, & A. Cheung (Eds.), *Forty-seventh yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 485-495). Chicago: National Reading Conference.