



2022

## Criticism, Praise, and the Red Pen: The Role of Elementary School Teachers on the Enduring Efficacy of Writing Instructors

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### Recommended Citation

Kimble, Julie (2022) "Criticism, Praise, and the Red Pen: The Role of Elementary School Teachers on the Enduring Efficacy of Writing Instructors," *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol11/iss1/3>

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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Robert A. Griffin (University of West Georgia) and Laura Kimble (Emory University) for their editing contributions for this paper. I would also like to thank John Ponder (University of West Georgia) who provided permission and support for this research and Tamra W. Ogletree (University of West Georgia) for the autobiography curriculum used to gather the data for this project.

## **Criticism, Praise, and the Red Pen: The Role of Elementary School Teachers on the Enduring Efficacy of Writing Instructors**

**Julie Kimble**, *University of West Georgia*

*In writing, we are each time calling out to humanity, our own and other people's, in the dark and limitless void of existence. And in being read, felt, understood, and acknowledged, we hear a response amid the echoes. (Zoe)*

This quote comes from one of the participants in this study, Zoe (a pseudonym), and she illustrates not only an ability to express herself beautifully but also her understanding of our inextricable connection with writing. Zoe is a middle school teacher, and her early experiences led her to pen these expertly crafted sentences with confidence. She writes alongside her students often and speaks of how writing has always come easily to her, but what shaped her into the confident writing teacher that she is today? A teacher's own early experiences with writing, whether positive or negative, have a significant effect on their efficacy as teachers and on the instruction for the students that they teach (Bruning & Kauffman, 2016). Sometimes these memories are latent, buried in years of pain of the rejection or humiliation from those initial experiences; at other times, mentors step in and create a more positive environment in which young writers thrive and then become adept writers.

Autobiography allows a venue to explore these early writing experiences and to improve pedagogical practice through this reflection (Elba-Luwisch, F., 2007; Schubert, W. H., & Ayers, W. 1999; Berryman, C., 1999.) For this qualitative project, the researcher used 18 of the 28 essays submitted for the "Writing Autobiography" assignment for the graduate level writing class for educators, entitled "Literacy Engagement through Writing," a requirement for a master's degree in literacy at the researcher's institution. The purpose of the class is to instruct these teachers to better learn how to instruct writing through writing

workshop in their various schools and age levels. In the literacy program, teachers explore through a writing autobiography assignment the memories of their earliest writing experiences and determine how those experiences fit into their current teaching careers. They were asked to do the following: record their earliest writings, school experiences with writing instruction (positive and/or negative), mentors who helped them along the way, the types of writing that they regularly participate in whether for work or for pleasure, and a self-assessment about the quality of their current writing (whether formal or not). This autobiography assignment produced a number of indicators which pointed to the vital role of elementary school teachers in enduring attitudes toward writing. The researcher used narrative analysis to characterize and explore the effect of these early writing experiences on this set of teachers' writing efficacy, based on their own reflections and memories submitted for this assignment, and to what degree these writing experiences affect their current teaching of writing.

The purpose of this paper is to examine early influences on writing efficacy for teachers through reflection gained through autobiography. First, the discussion will center on theory and completed research in this field, followed by method and findings. The results will be delineated followed up a detailed discussion of their implications for classroom practice and avenues for possible future research.

### **Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework**

The following sections will explore research already completed in teacher writing efficacy and will discuss how teacher efficacy and previous writing experience translates into classroom practice of writing instruction. The next section will review the benefits of teacher autobiography and its influence on writing pedagogy and curriculum.

### **The Relationship between Teacher Experience and Practice**

Within the educational literature, research often focuses on negative writing efficacy and its causes rather than what creates positive writing identities. This may be in part because the anxiety that writing causes for young writers is great—almost as much as it is for the some of the teachers who teach them. The young students must gain an understanding of the process and confidence in their ability to communicate through writing, and then be willing to write again and take risks in their future compositions. This self-efficacy determines whether when faced with obstacles (criticism, boredom, fear), these students will initiate coping behaviors to face this task, how long they will try to succeed, and if they will try again (Bandura, 1977, p. 191).

The anxiety is even greater for teachers who *were* the students who did not gain the efficacy in writing earlier because now they find themselves having to teach this difficult task to their students. Some “just get by” with writing as they

work their way through college, and then find themselves in the uncomfortable position of teaching a subject with which they feel inadequate. Education programs do not always adequately prepare pre-service teachers to provide productive feedback on student writing, and even English literature-based courses for teachers focus on producing writing, not teaching it (Langeberg, 2019). This results in a difficult transition from university to practice for preservice teachers (Cook, et al. 2002; Moore, 2002; Grossman et al., 2000). This scenario, anxious young writing students facing instructors who feel unprepared and do not view themselves as talented writers, produces a cyclic storm of feelings of inadequacy for student writers and teachers alike. When teaching writing, they rely on correcting grammar and spelling errors on their students' work, rather than encouraging more creative compositions and assign fewer writing assignments (Frank, 2002; Langeburg, 2019; Calkins, 1994).

Teachers who self-identify as struggling or non-writers avoid the added discomfort of what it would take to change their own perceptions and identity of themselves as writers. Burke's (2006) research revealed that changing one's self perception is an uncomfortable business, and people dislike making large changes in their identities. Additionally, the resources of the K-12 school systems into which the teachers begin their work as writing instructors "ultimately limit preservice teachers' understandings of who they are (and who they can be) as teachers of writing, despite the efforts of the teacher preparation program" (Kohnen, 2019, p. 349). Some of these resources include an atmosphere where non-standardized writing assignments are mandated and freedom for curriculum choice is limited. All of these factors contribute to both teacher and student anxiety with writing.

Research on how teachers view themselves as writers is not extensive and what is available is sometimes criticized as falling short of scientific replicability (Smagorinsky, 1987). This leaves a deficit in understanding how to improve writing efficacy for teachers so they can not only confidently produce writing but also teach it. "Yet, the general notion that teachers of writing must be writers themselves persists, and remains the focus of both professional development and research, because arguably, one cannot teach what one does not know" (Bifuh-Ambe, 2020, p. 1). Bifuh-Ambe also found in her 2020 study on writing efficacy in teachers that they are not adequate judges of their own writing and often underestimate their abilities. Additionally, Bifuh-Ambe found that teachers based their own writing efficacy on the performance of their students' writing scores (p. 17). Their success is "bound" to the writing scores of the students, rather their own abilities. Bifuh-Ambe stressed that because teachers are also scored in evaluations based on student performance, those scores carry even more weight in and further complicate self-perceptions of their writing skills. The structure of standardized education and its prescriptive nature has limited our understanding of how to create more positive writing identities for our students and teachers.

### **The Value of Teacher Autobiography for Students and Curriculum.**

In 1883, William Dilthey defined autobiography as “the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us” (p. 85). Since that time, autobiography has become a valuable source for improving pedagogy and curriculum. Since the data for this study comes from autobiographical essays from teachers, the researcher believed that it is important to understand its value for not only the teacher and that teacher’s practice, but also to improve the curriculum in which they and the students are immersed. Through reflection, these revelations from autobiographies can reveal problems in educators’ own classrooms that were not evident before. Teacher autobiographies have been heavily used in qualitative research because they focus on “social fractures and contradictions as well as personal ones” (Ayers et al., 2008, p. 307). As teachers examine their own experiences through autobiography, they are made more aware of similarities to their own learning in their current classrooms. Berryman argued that although autobiographies can be defined as “a series of paradoxes: fact and fiction, private and communal, lessons and lies,” they mirror the practice of theories of larger cultural identity trends (1999, p. 80).

Through teacher autobiographies, we can understand our students and the curriculum with which we engage them. Reflections of early writing experiences reveal the inequities in instruction and opportunity as well as attitudes toward writing, and the importance of “place” in which they learned to write. The collection of teacher memories contributes to action research and reveals the value of teacher’s reflections and experience in improving their pedagogy (Schubert & Ayers, 1999; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Understanding our own narratives and the curriculum that created our stories enables us to better understand and empathize with our students and the curriculum that affects them (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 31). Studies have been conducted that analyzed how the reflections of teacher autobiographies encouraged culturally responsive teaching by examining the writers’ cultural backgrounds and biases (Berche 2018).

The narratives are not complete without context of their “place,” however; while they consider the individual’s more comprehensive historical story, they should also examine “the embeddedness of the teacher in a school and school system and its mandated curricula, ideologies, pedagogical trends, and reform processes need to be taken into account” (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007, p. 359). Not only do autobiographies address the school and writing instruction that teachers experienced in their lifetimes, they also include reflections on their own teaching in their current school situations. Frank (2002) used teacher autobiography and story mapping to determine writing self-efficacy in her research of a group of elementary school teachers. She found that while writing the autobiography may not cure the anxiety that the teachers felt for teaching writing, their new discovered

awareness of their own writing practices enabled them to better model and teach specific writing strategies to their own students (p. 194).

Additionally, autobiographies provided the teachers an opportunity to participate in a creative activity that they may not have the time to do on their own or with their classes—write. “Unfortunately, many teachers do not appear to have confidence in their writing abilities; and those that do, often decry the lack of time to practice and hone their skills, which may further erode their confidence” (Bifuh-Ambe, 2020, p. 5). Because of increased standardization of curriculum over the last two decades, writing instruction has become more prescriptive, producing a vacuum of time and creative opportunities. The focus instead turns to test-taking because educators must prove not only their own efficacy in the standardized world, but also that of their students, so their perceived roles have changed from creative leaders to test-teachers (Cremin, 2006; Grainger et al., 2005). Participating in writing activities like this autobiography places the participants in a “risk taking” exercise that enables them to experience the tension that occurs during the creative process of writing and helps them to empathize with their students and the emotional turmoil that writing sometimes produces for them. This empathy and willingness to take risks is vital as writing mentors, because “schools today don’t go nearly far enough to encourage students to take risks in their learning” (Fletcher, 2013, p. 17). Using writing education students’ autobiographical essays, the purpose of this study was to explore how early writing experiences influenced writing self-efficacy. The research questions were:

- Question 1. Who were the “influencers” who played a role in these teachers’ early writing experiences?
- Question 2. How have these early experiences affected their writing identity and self-efficacy as writing instructors?

## **Methods**

### **Research Site and Participants**

The study was conducted at a public university in a suburban area of a large metropolitan area in the southern United States. The participants were students within a class focused on learning how to engage in literature through writing workshop and autobiography to better their writing pedagogy within their own classrooms. The participants were 18 teachers whose teaching experience range from three to 16 years. All taught within the same state as the university and most worked within the metropolitan area. Of the participants, all but five were elementary school teachers. One was a special education instructional coach, two taught middle school, and two taught high school. All these participants were women; thirteen were Caucasian and five were African American, which closely follows demographics for teachers in Georgia in 2020 (Pelfrey & Flamini, 2020). Having only women in the study created a limitation because no male teachers were

included, but since national statistics show that during 2017-18, 89% of elementary school teachers were female, the percentage of teachers closely mirrored that of the participants in the study (NCES, 2020).

### **Data Sources and Data Collection**

The data for this research evolved from a fall 2020 class assignment entitled “Writing Autobiography,” which asked the students to write a detailed narrative about their writing experiences, including information about their earliest writings, school experiences with writing instruction (positive and/or negative), mentors who helped along the way, and finally, what types of writing the students now participated in, whether for work or pleasure. They were also to discuss how these experiences affected their current teaching of writing (see Appendix A for assignment and rubric).

The essays were uploaded to the class online learning system (LMS). After the semester in which the students wrote the autobiography was over and grades submitted, students were queried through email with a description of the proposed research and request for permission to use their submitted essays as data for the project. A consent form was attached with the invitation to sign and return as confirmation of their willingness to participate in the research. This email outlined how the essays would be used and explained that their names would not be revealed in the research. They were also told that their participation was voluntary and that if they chose to submit the consent form, they might be asked to clarify statements in their essays but would not be required to do more. Eighteen of the 28 students queried returned consent forms allowing their essays to be used for this study, and their essays were downloaded from the university’s LMS.

### **Data Analysis**

Because the data for this study consisted of autobiographical stories of the participants’ history of writing experiences, Narrative Coding was used to analyze the essays. Saldaña (2013) describes Narrative Coding as utilizing the terms and structures of literary elements to make sense of the text and combines ideas from various fields in the humanities and social sciences. The interpretation of these codes can then be approached from literary, sociological, psychological, and anthropological points of view (p. 131). This form of analysis is an effective approach for this study because narratives these essays reveal much about the formation of the participants’ writing identity (Reissman, 2008). “Narrative Coding is appropriate for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences to understand the human condition through story, which is justified in and of itself as a legitimate way of knowing” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 132). Since these participants discuss not only their own reflections and memories of their writing experiences



but also that of their interactions with their teachers, these intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships can be explored through the structures of story.

The narratives were coded for the following literary elements: Tone, setting, time, plot, storyline, characterization, character type, theme, and coda. As the coding progressed, sub elements were added to address specific situations that presented themselves in the essays: motif, climax, and subplots. The codes were eventually narrowed to setting (time/sense of place), tone/diction, motifs, climax/turning point, characterization, theme, and epiphany. The essays shared several common elements that did not require a label; they were all first-person point of view narratives with the purpose of explaining the participants' writing history, and many of them fit the bildungsroman category, or "coming of age" (as a writer).

After the essays were coded, common themes and motifs emerged and were noted to include in the results. Since all the students discussed their former writing teachers and other adults who influenced their writing, especially during their elementary and middle school years, composite characters were created to better reveal the descriptions of two most common types of characters that grew from these essays: the mentor and the antagonist. The character sketches, though they are a collective of the common descriptions of people in the essays and dialogue attributed to them by the authors, utilize verbatim phrases from the data as well as the application of a "narrative smoothing process" that "fills the gaps between events and actions" (Kim, 2016, p. 197). Kim notes that while this "smoothing" helps the reader to make sense of the data, it also bears the burden of accurately portraying the meaning of the text in the correct context while including some details and omitting others (p. 202). While this limitation exists, the composite characters should fairly represent the characteristics of the influential people in the participants' stories.

### **Findings and Discussion**

After the essays were coded, individual experiences were placed into the assigned categories. This presented a challenge because some of the descriptions fit into multiple categories. For example, one motif that emerged from the essays was "journals." Some experiences also described journal writing by family members, which also influenced the participants' writing identity and are described further in this paper under family members as mentors. While they could be included in both sections, they were placed where they had the most impact to reduce redundancy. What follows are the resulting categories: Setting, diction, climax, motifs, characterization (and composite characters), and epiphanies.

### **Setting, Sense of place and time**

Since the majority of the participants grew up and lived in the city where the university was located, many of their memories are set there, in South Georgia or in the surrounding states of Tennessee, Florida, and West Virginia. One participant wrote about growing up in New York. As for the period of time discussed in these narratives, participants' experience was weighted more in elementary school memories, but some spoke about meaningful experiences in middle and high school. Few spoke of college experiences. The essays all ended with their current teaching positions and reflections of classroom practices for writing.

### **Diction and Tone: Choice of Descriptors Reveal the Complexity of Emotions in Writing**

Diction and tone words were pulled during the coding process as these teachers discussed their lifetime of writing experiences. Diction is important because it reveals the choice of words that the participants used to describe their experiences, and these selections point to the tone, which reflects the authors' attitude toward a subject. The writers found a plethora of negatively associated vocabulary to describe how the act of writing made them feel as they matured through their writing journeys, but they were less explicit and more repetitive in their positive descriptions of the process. Here are some examples of both:

- **Negative:** nervous, complete failure, negative outlook, doubts, forced, hate, stressful, embarrassment, regret, dread, boring, micromanaged, fatigued, fragile, scary abyss, humiliated, hate, anxiety, love/hate, timid, judged, mental block, defeated, difficult, laughable
- **Positive:** captivated, wonderful, transformed, love, desire, escape, longing, solace, animated, energetic, fluent, therapy, spark, hooked, avid, enthusiastic, snug, secure, validated, encouraged, thrilled

It is worthy to note that often these writers included both negative and positive diction when describing their writing experiences and their different experiences with teachers and family members who acted either as mentors or antagonists in their stories. The choice of descriptors, especially the negative ones, illustrate the emotional components of learning to write and the fears and anxiety that it produces: *nervous, stressful, hate, anxiety, timid, fragile, mental block, difficult, scary abyss*. This agrees with research that studied young students and their attitudes toward writing, who described similar feelings of anxiety during writing assignments (Gadd et al., 2019). Other negative connotations point to some of the motifs that are revealed (discussed in a later section) of shame: *complete failure, humiliated, embarrassment, laughable, judged*. Many of the students, even those who self-identified as now being confident writers, detailed stories of how they had been humiliated in the classroom because of their "failed" writing attempts, which

in early years would have included handwriting, not even the actual content of the compositions.

Another negative theme in the diction was instruction-based: *boring, micromanaged, fatigued, dread*. These descriptors occurred in sections where the teachers described either a failure to connect with the act of writing or in the loss of love for writing that occurred due to “micromanaged” writing assignments where they were given no choice in assignment topics or forms. This led to the next words in this set, where the participants remembered being “bored” or “fatigued” with the writing assignments given them, leading to a “dread” of writing in any form. As Freire explains, “Teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event. Instead, many teachers transform these experiences into a technical event, into something without emotions, without creativity—but with repetition” (Freire, 1985, p.79). Participants discussed the longing for a choice in their writing assignments and a desire for more creative writing assignments.

Positive connotations were fewer in number and variety in the participants’ essays, and could be categorized in two ways: an inherent “love” of writing that revealed itself early in these students’ works, and an “escape” that provided a safe place for the students to record their thoughts during difficult times that they endured both in younger years and to the present time. In the first inherent category of “love” words: *captivated, wonderful, transformed, desire, animated, energetic, fluent, spark, hooked, avid, enthusiastic*. Many of these students discussed an early affinity for writing that was often encouraged by family members or early teachers who provided them with the materials to write (journals, most often), encouraged them to enter contests which further *validated* (another positive descriptor) their work, or through personal examples of those people in their lives who were avid writers. In the second category, the participants spoke of how writing in journals (another motif discussed in a later section) provided relief in difficult life situations like death of a family member or friend, divorce, poverty, or abuse: *escape, solace, therapy, longing, desire, snug, secure*. The positive affiliations with these words and writing were confident descriptions of how writing improved their life situations, providing a safe haven for their thoughts, concerns, and hopes for the future.

Fletcher (2013) notes, “Our classrooms are filled with students desperate for adults who care about writing and books as much as they do. As teachers, we find ourselves in a unique position to be mentors for these emerging writers” (p. 10). These teachers spoke fondly of not only their love of writing, but those enthusiastic teachers and family members who inspired them. Students need mentors who are enthusiastic about their subject—in this case, writing.

### **Climax, Turning Points in the Writing Journey**

Each teacher discussed a climax, or turning point in their journey as a writer—for better or for worse. It is worth noting that the grade level that received the most discussion by these teachers as being meaningful for their development as a writer was third grade, with seven teachers naming that grade as eventful, followed by fourth and fifth grades with five teachers writing that these were climatic years for their writing identities. The remaining teachers' climatic years were scattered throughout elementary, middle, and high school. These climatic events during third grade mirror research that found students' self-identity of academic ability in writing and math becomes more set around eight years old, or third grade (Ehlm, Lindberg, & Hasslehorn, 2013, p. 287). The following excerpts portray some of the common writing experiences that the participants shared. All of the names have been changed to pseudonyms and italics are used to denote exact wording of the participants.

***Paper:** Every day for seven years—2,556 days—I wrote my thoughts from the farm in my journal. There wasn't one day where my grandfather read my journal,"* wrote Paper, a fifth-grade teacher who said that her grandfather who had given her a composition book when she was in elementary school and told her to write her observations in it every day as they walked around the family farm. When she asked him why he never read her entries, she discovered that he had never been taught to read. He nicknamed her "Paper" so she would remember the importance of reading. *"Papa, why did you never read my stories?" Tears lined his eyes, forming small droplets when he blinked. "Paper, some thoughts can only be understood by the mind that thought them," he said. "And words can only be understood by the mind that is taught to read them."*

***Rhonda:** While reading a story she had written to her third-grade class and teacher, "I was excited, I was reading with energy, and I wasn't rushing through the story. Once I finished, I noticed that Ms. Thomas [pseudonym] did not look happy, and I couldn't not figure out why. I will never forget how quick she was ready to tell me everything I did wrong. Don't get me wrong, I was in third grade, so my story wasn't perfect, but she was so harsh about it. This changed my perspective on writing and also changed my personality as well.*

***Barbara:** After participating as a third grader in a two-week college summer course at a local university as part of a special program in third grade, Barbara's first book was published and was distributed to local elementary schools. This program was essential to my growth as a writer, as I was*

*taught how to see an idea all the way through each stage of the process. . . [it] was the foundational event that influenced me as a writer during my younger years. It was a daunting, inspiring, and supremely educational experience that solidified my love of writing, and I learned to feel confident in my own skill and talent.*

***Jill:** My passion for writing continued to grow until I went into middle school. It was during this time that I stopped writing for pleasure. Essays and book reports became my only writing assignments and I was no longer allowed to write creatively in school. As my spark began to dwindle, I even stopped journaling. . . Writing soon became a mundane task I loathed to do. As a result of being restricted about what I could write, a once loved hobby became the bane of my existence.*

### **Motifs: The Poison Red Pen, Journals, Handwriting, and Shame**

#### ***Red Ink***

With the history of the emotional connections and much-despised color of red ink in grading writing assignments, it is surprising that teachers use red ink at all in their commentary of student work. While this motif may seem to be a cliché, nearly every participant essay discussed this specific motif in their writing journeys. Participants wrote of teacher commentary that “butchered” their writing, red pen, red circles and lines around grammatical errors and paragraph suggestions. Even if the commentary is positive, students have negative associations with the color and have been trained to see failure when they see red (Schuster, 1998, p. 330). Some even associated their teachers’ red hair, red glasses, and red “clicking heels” with negative commentary and writing experiences in school. The images of red pen revealed a violent nature and was often personified in a *violent red pen*, or as Barbara described: “A red, taunting C at the top, followed by slashes of red pen across the page. It was the equivalent of an English class horror film” (Barbara). Even so, not all red marks are negative. This same participant described an encounter with her teacher when she questioned the “butchery” of commentary on her paper:

I was first in line at her desk, ready to defend my paper as if I was arguing against a murder conviction in the trial of the century. She took one look at my paper, and before I could muster a single word, she said, “Ah, I remember this one. Fluff. Fluff everywhere.” She then proceeded to explain every single notation that she had made, completely justifying her grade and sending me into a Twilight Zone where I rightfully earned a ‘C’ on a paper. (Barbara)

This mirrors research from Beach and Friedrich (2006) that indicated teacher explanations for feedback can greatly impact learning. However, this student had to *ask* for this additional feedback. This student was able to resolve her anxiety through questioning the instructor, but as is revealed above, she is a confident and adept writer who was willing to take a chance and question why she received the marks that she did. Other participants did not write about questioning the “red ink” commentary; they accepted it as true and integrated into their own identity as a writer.

Still, *how* the commentary is written, with red ink or not, does not have to be a negative writing experience. Another participant wrote of a similar event as Barbara where the red pen was justified by her teacher in a way that did not leave her feeling as though she was hopeless as a writer: “She was amused at all of the terrible ways that I could use a semicolon and dangling modifier. She just didn’t do it in such a way that made me feel defeated and unable to create the perfect paper” (Jane). This is supported by Ruegg’s 2018 research that found that critical feedback alone does not necessarily hinder student efficacy, and that more important was the frequency with which the student receives feedback, negative or positive. This study also found that teacher feedback produced more writing self-efficacy than peer feedback. Student acceptance of this critique is influenced by other factors as well, including the classroom culture and how the commentary is presented (p. 97). Langeburg found in her 2019 two-year study of eighth grade teacher feedback that the teachers viewed writing student commentary as “tedious and time consuming,” which impacted the quality of responses provided to the student and the students’ own perceptions of their writing abilities.

### ***Journals***

The use of journals, both in and out of the classroom, was a common motif in the essays. Participants wrote about journaling in both positive and negative terms as to the development of writing self-efficacy. Some of the comments centered on choice of writing topics:

For the most part, the majority of my earliest memories involve boring, monotonous writing prompts and tasks that killed my creativity and made me dread writing I yearned to write, but not form style or in response to a prompt. I wanted to be creative! I wanted to tell a story! (Noel).

Other participants described journaling as a release and “therapy during times of bad anxiety” (Melanie), but those students were able to choose the topics of their journal entries. Zoe, a confident writer, “From as early as I can remember, I kept a journal. I wrote consistently, if not furiously, as a child—it was the defining factor of my existence.” A surprising detail that was revealed in these essays was

the influence of *others* writing in journals and how those examples influenced their own writing. Cassandra, who self-identified as a non-confident writer, wrote that her “parents did not journal or write anything that I can remember . . . I did not have any older siblings to model a love or dislike of writing either way,” while Jill, who identified herself as a confident writer, had a different experience:

I remember sitting in bed with my mother as she wrote in her journal. I would watch as her pen would glide across the paper producing all the words and wishes she could not share. I longed to learn how to write like my mother when I was a young child. My grandmother also loved to write. Like my mother, she kept a journal and filled it with prayers, life events, feelings, her hopes and dreams, as well as her favorite recipes. These two influential women in my life inspired my love for writing. (Jill)

These family members understood what Fletcher (1996) described as “putting ingredients into a pot for soup and knowing from experience that it will taste good today but better tomorrow. And even better the day after that” (p. 29). Journaling not only provided a place for these participants to purge their emotions, but also to practice their writing, as well as “a private place to write badly” (p. 56).

### ***Shame***

Tomkins (1995) speaks of the affect (an emotional connection) of shame and contempt on identity, and in this case, a writing identity. “It does not matter whether the humiliated one has been shamed by derisive laughter or whether he mocks himself. In either event he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth” (p. 133). Tomkins explained that when the expectation of something positive is replaced with contempt, shame occurs, and this shame in turn causes the recipient to turn away from that which caused the discomfort (p. 138). In this case, the student expects positive feedback from the teacher for the writing, and instead receives contempt or derision. This causes the student to pull back from what caused the original shame, the writing. Contempt, from a source in an authority position, according to Tomkins, “is the mark of the oppressor,” and also leads to a new cycle--self-contempt. In this situation, the student extends and repeats the original contemptuous comments to his or herself in perpetuity (p. 139). The participants in this study discussed this particular phenomenon of shame and contempt repeatedly in these essays.

For example, Jennifer wrote an anonymous letter to her high school newspaper defending a school beauty pageant after the paper printed a negative article about it and its participants. The paper’s editors chose to print it, but also marked up each grammatical error in the letter.

The article alongside bashed my writing ability, called out every mistake, and used the letter as ammunition for the author's view of the school pageant. Although I was extremely grateful that no one knew who wrote the letter, it still crushed me. This only confirmed my hatred for school and writing. (Jennifer)

While this interaction was not directly with a teacher, a teacher supervisor would have approved and read the rebuke from the student editor for the publication to be printed. Regardless of culpability for the event, Jennifer's opinion of what she perceived as her own limited writing abilities became even more hardened. Another participant, Sidney, discussed a humiliating experience that set the tone for her future writing efficacy:

I remember running for student council in sixth grade . . . I made campaign posters to hang around the school and misspelled "business." One of the teachers passive-aggressively chastised me in front of the gathering of candidates, discussing how "serious students" proofread their work. (Sidney)

Sidney added that her parents had proofed the posters but either did not see the error or did not recognize it as incorrect, extending her shame to her family as well as herself. Jane wrote of a similar experience in an English class where a high school teacher "took my thoughts and feelings about a play that I was passionate about and ripped it to shreds by telling me that my opinion was not valid, not to mention that I was completely wrong." While students need commentary to improve their writing, how that feedback is presented can either feed or poison a student's desire to write.

### ***Handwriting***

The participants' "turning away" from writing sometimes happened long before they were even able to understand how to compose a sentence; handwriting became a stumbling block for the students' identities as writers as early as kindergarten. This was especially difficult for left-handed students, who as Suzanne describes, "have to push the pencil from left to right instead of pulling it gracefully along the page" She wrote that her writing was "awkwardly sprawled" across the paper. These students equated poor handwriting with poor writing skills: bad handwriting = bad writing. Another participant, Noel, struggled with handwriting from elementary school through high school.

Mrs. Maloney [pseudonym] was a stickler about handwriting. I did not hold my pencil correctly. Erasures were aplenty and stray scribbles graced my



margins. She would call me out every single day about my writing. Making me rewrite things over and over again until my hand was fatigued and my writer's soul was crushed. I do not think she ever commented on my strengths as a writer or how my word choice and vocabulary were above par when compared to most of my peers. She only focused my actual handwriting. (Noel)

Noel also discussed how her twelfth grade English taught his students how to write commas in a singularly different way. "We had to practice writing a comma. We had to write one hundred of them and every single one had to be correct or we had to start all over." The students practiced on a note card. If their commas were not written satisfactorily, he would tear up the note card and tell them to begin again. Noel wrote that this experience caused flashbacks to her earlier fourth grade experiences with handwriting and the related aversion to writing.

### **Characterization (Composite Characters)**

The participants' characterization of their former teachers was colorful and dialogue-filled. Their descriptions were compiled into the two basic types of teachers that they detailed in their essays, the antagonist and the mentor. Exact phrasing of the students' essays was used as often as possible, so these composite characters and their dialogue are described in the participants' words, changed only to fit grammatically. While it is unlikely that any one teacher would have all of the qualities outlined in either of these composite characters, these characterizations might sound familiar to the reader. They are also placed in the time most spoken about for climatic moments in the essays, third or fourth grades.

#### ***Composite Teacher 1: Antagonist***

The teacher is strict, unfriendly, and most of her third-grade students secretly think that she hates her job. Her students seldom see a smile or hear a chuckle. She has red hair, red glasses, red lipstick, and clickity clacks around the room on red high heels. This is appropriate, because her favorite grading color is also red, with which she writes phrases like, "Molly, your handwriting looks like chicken scratch. Write it again!" She is quick to point out errors and slow to share praise. This day, she hands out note cards to the students and instructs the students to practice writing commas, not how to use them, but how to write them (with a swoop at the end). After thirty minutes, she surveys their work, reaches down to pick up a student's card, and then tears the card into pieces. "Nope. Begin again," she says. This teacher is a presence in the room, especially when she marches up and down the aisles, as one of her students later wrote, "like a sad, small-town parade, distributing papers from one child to the next, their lines littered with brightly colored marks like confetti."

After class, the teacher calls for students to share their best work to be displayed in the hallway. As one timid student brings his assignment with his classmates to the door to post outside, she stops him. “This is not good enough to be posted, please return to your seat,” leaving him stunned and embarrassed. This classroom is pin-drop quiet, and discussion is discouraged. This teacher occasionally carries a yardstick as she moves around the room, randomly slamming it down on the desk of a student who has daydreamed away from the monotonous, mind-numbing writing prompt on the board.

### ***Composite Teacher 2: Mentor***

It is morning at the beginning of writing time, the fourth-grade teacher squeals in fear. Her shrill voice echoes across the room as she jumps on top of a desk in one swift leap. “Mouse!” she shrieks as her students sit in disbelief of the dramatic display in front of them. The teacher stops, looks around her room at the students who sit in amazed shock as she stands on that desk, and commands, “Now, write about it.” This teacher is a ball of energy who loves writing and breathes love and laughter in her classroom every day. She uses beautiful words that the students have not heard before, but this only makes them want to use them too. As the students write, she walks around the room and provides suggestions, redirections, and praise. “Well done, young lady,” she says to one, flashing a beaming smile. To another who is hesitant to show his writing, “If writing is something you love to do, then all of your writing pieces are important.” Another student continually erases her paper, obviously frustrated, but the mentor encourages the students’ revisions.

The class has already begun the day with ten minutes of “chat time” with the teacher to discuss everyday life before the academic work begins, and the students seem at ease. After the class finishes writing about the staged mouse attack, the teacher asks the students to share their work, after which the students applaud for each composition. “Writing is a performance and when a performer performs, the audience should applaud to show their appreciation for the performer’s time and talent,” the teacher explains. When the inevitable parent phone calls arrive at the end of the day (about desk jumping), she explains to a student’s parent, “A good teacher will do whatever it takes to see a student succeed. We should be flexible and willing to work in different ways. Maybe that means I have to teach while doing cartwheels in order for my students to retain this information. If that’s what it takes, I guess I need to start learning how to do a cartwheel.”

### **Epiphanies, Reflections of the Writing Journey**

These pivotal understandings were included throughout the narratives, usually in the coda or final reflection of how their writing journey had affected who they are as writers and teachers. They are separated into a “hindsight” section, where the

participants reviewed their histories and drew conclusions from their experiences, and a section where they discuss teaching writing as an adult. Topics included: the need for choice in writing assignments, the value of community in writing efficacy, teacher/student emotional connections, their current aversion to writing, and feelings of being “pushed along.”

### ***Early Writing Consequences, Then and Now***

*I believe that if I had been given the opportunity to write about things that were enjoyable to me and things that interested me, then I would have become a better writer at an early age. (Tonya)*

*Being an adult who can objectively look back on these events, it is clear to me they [teachers] did not appreciate my interests and therefore channeled me into their own interests. (Sidney)*

*I could have been a lost cause. I could have given up on writing altogether. Still, I had encouraging parents, teachers, neighbors, and coaches that put a high value on effort, work ethic, and success, and without them, I would not enjoy writing as I do today. (Suzanne)*

*These teachers—underpaid, underappreciated, lacking in time and absolutely overflowing with students—believed in me, felt things in response to my words, and pushed me forward to embrace a love of writing that has literally saved me time and again. (Zoe)*

*These teachers and mentors shared some common characteristics. They were passionate about reading and writing and recognized the extraordinary power of words. They helped me build on my existing strengths, encouraged me to take risks I would have never dared to on my own, and knew that their personal connection with me outweighed anything they could ever teach me. (Hannah)*

*Because I was a student who participated and followed the rules, it was if I was placed on the back burner and pushed along. (Jennifer)*

### ***Teaching Writing as an Adult***

*As a teacher, I see how important writing is for the education of our youth, but as a person, I see it as so much more. It is a much-needed part of life that many teens and adults need to safely express all of their anxieties, fears, or joyful moments.” (Jane)*

*It is evident of my love for writing through my teaching so this makes students more motivated to write as well.” (Melanie)*

*I believe that as an adult, when you think you can't write, you stay away from it at all costs outside of work. I don't believe that I am the best writer, and there is certainly room for growth. However, I no longer shy away from writing for pleasure, and I have learned how to effectively write within my profession. Writing has ultimately become a very effective tool in my life. (Molly)*

*Inside of the classroom, I am the foundation for my students. If they realize I am not confident about my writing, they will absorb that energy and doubt themselves. (Rhonda)*

*From the moment I became a teacher, writing has been the most difficult subject to understand and successfully demonstrate in elementary education. I believe this is because writing encompasses so many skills, and all of those skills are used at the same time. (Cassandra)*

## **Themes and Discussion**

### **The Effect of Early Experiences on Later Writing and Teaching Is Substantial**

Tonya, a fourth-grade teacher, spoke about the assumptions writing teachers make about their students, especially in college: “I guess college professors thought that I should have known how to be an acceptable writer by the time I started college. Little did they know that I was turned off from writing during early years. Since I had a negative feeling towards writing, I had no idea how to become a better writer.”

However, just because a student has negative writing experiences with their early teachers does not ensure that they will always be uncomfortable with writing, although negative residual associations remain that follow them into adulthood. Third grade teacher Noel described her elementary writing experiences as “boring” and “monotonous” and “micromanaged,” and recounted how her fourth-grade teacher criticized her handwriting so much that she did “not want to write another word ever again.” This criticism of the physical act of writing, even before the content or syntax, was enough to halt the desire to set word to paper. Yet, the next year in school, her new teacher balanced this aversion to writing with this comment about Noel’s less-than-perfect handwriting, “You are not sloppy. Your pencil is unable to keep up with that miraculous brain of yours.” Noel’s reflections indicate that she had a mix of both negative and positive experiences with writing in her early years, but that her negative experiences helped to mold her into the type of teacher she wanted to be. “Knowing what you do not want to be is just as important as knowing what you would like to be,” Noel said.

Stuart Hall (1996), a sociologist who studies identity, speaks of its fluidity. While identity can be defined as a “recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group,” this is a “process never ‘completed,’ always ‘in process.’ It is not determined in the sense that it can be ‘won’ or ‘lost,’ sustained or abandoned” (1996, p. 2). The early events in a student’s writing experience—even negative ones—can be overwritten. This idea was not always expressed in the participants’ essays; many of them clung to those early negative experiences and seemingly set them in concrete for their writing identities. For example, even though Noel had positive experiences after that fourth-grade experience, she wrote that “her [the earlier teacher’s] comments have followed me throughout my entire life and continue to make me self-conscious even into my adult life; I still apologize for my penmanship to this day.”

Students carry these early criticisms from teachers well past the time in which they received them. The long-term effect is that these negative early experiences created fear for these participants, especially for teaching writing. As Tonya wrote, “I am very nervous about having to teach them writing because it is not something that I have done adequately.” Sidney was more direct: “I will say I am the embodiment of the insulting cliché, ‘Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach.’”

The positive experiences that these teachers discussed also come into play when they discuss their mentors and how their encouragement and enthusiasm for writing was infectious, creating a welcoming atmosphere where their writing skills could grow. Many of the participants wrote about the personal connections that these teachers had with their students, and as Hannah wrote of her teachers, “their personal connection with me outweighed anything they could ever teach me.” Several of the participants wrote about teachers who were *not* writing teachers but still combined writing in their classroom with a comfortable environment that added to their own efficacy as students and writers. As discussed earlier, those who had positive experiences with writing also spoke of the community of writers that they had within their families, which added to their writing identities.

### **Confident vs. Struggling Writer**

Of the 18 participants, seven self-identified as struggling writers, 11 as confident writers. The confident writers consistently used “love” to describe the process, and they also described positive experiences with mentors who helped them gain a love for writing. It was interesting to note that the participants who described having natural abilities in language arts experienced vastly different writing experiences than their peers. The students who described their handwriting as neat and legible handwriting and those who claimed a natural ability to communicate through writing received more opportunities to hone their skills and build their confidence. For example, the participants in this study who self-identified as confident writers

reported that they were invited to participate in special writing camps, contests, and share their writing with their peers in class as exemplars. For example, Barbara, who wrote that she preferred to spend her afternoons “inventing people and places instead of playing outside” wrote that she was placed in an advanced writing class in kindergarten and then in third grade was invited to attend a special two-week summer writing camp at a local university. This experience led her to her first published story. “This was the foundational event that influenced me as a writer during my younger years. It was a daunting, inspiring, and supremely educational experience that solidified my love of writing, and I learned to feel confident in my own skill and talent.”

Janet wrote that she was identified early as gifted and was placed in pull-out groups in elementary school and middle school, won an essay contest that allowed her to travel to Washington, D.C. “I learned that writing could take me places.” She participated in and won local writing contests. These extracurricular activities added to their growing writing efficacy, but they reveal one of the “social fractures” that Ayers described in his defense of autobiographies. We reward those who are already doing well and have natural talent, but leave behind those who are struggling with writing confidence.

Many of these self-proclaimed confident writers also attributed their early skills to family members who kept journals, wrote letters, and read extensively. These family examples influenced the students to model the behavior of the adults or siblings in their homes, and their positive experiences came long before the students actually attended school. Suzanne wrote that her mother was her earliest mentor. “Mom is a realist who delivered encouragement with tenderness and compassion with a hint of sarcasm and light-hearted humor.” Melanie also spoke of her mother, who encouraged and supported her in her desire to write creative stories. “Although I loved to write, I had only shared my creative stories with my mom,” although she later had an elementary school teacher who helped her feel comfortable enough to share her work. Janet’s influence was early, long before she went to school, “My parents read to me, my older brother read to me, and somewhere along the way I began to read to myself. My mom wrote letters, my dad wrote sermons, and even my brother could write. So, I started writing too.” These reflections illustrate the possibilities of improving how students feel about writing by including family members in the writing process.

### ***The Struggling Writer***

The participants who categorized themselves as non-confident or struggling writers developed this opinion of themselves early in their writing journeys, before middle and high school. Often, they were discouraged because of early negative feedback in elementary school, and for others, they never developed the love for writing that their “confident” counterparts described. Some of these participants reported that

because their writing skills were “adequate,” they were pushed through the school system’s grades without writing mastery. As Jennifer wrote, she was “put on the back burner and pushed along.” This followed with college, where professors expected writing competency, but faced students who felt insufficient to the many writing assignments required of them (Bifuh-Ambe, 2020).

Unlike their confident counterparts in the study, these participants did not have family members who encouraged writing or who spent much time writing themselves. Therefore, they did not have the modeling that provided practice and confidence for the other participants experienced as young writers. As adults, they tend to avoid writing as much as possible, and this translates to their classrooms where they reported that they only do the required writing, but do not pursue additional written assignments for their students. Cassandra explained the task of teaching writing as difficult because of its many moving components; students have to balance vocabulary with syntax, grammar, and style, and then teachers are required to show proof of these students’ academic achievement in these areas.

## **Conclusion**

This study established that these teachers’ early experiences with writing significantly affected their efficacy in writing and in teaching writing for their current students. In some cases, the participants were still learning handwriting when feelings of writing inadequacies were established through teacher criticism. While middle and high school also were listed as turning points in writing efficacy for these participants, the most common climatic moment for the participants—for better or worse—occurred in third, fourth, or fifth grades. Factors that negatively affected these participants in their writing self-efficacy were handwriting criticism, inadequate or negative feedback on writing, in-class shaming of writing assignments, and lack of choice of writing topics. For those who self-identified as confident writers, extracurricular activities such as summer writing camps and programs contributed significantly to their confidence. Mentors, both teachers and family members who encouraged writing and risk-taking, contributed to the recovery from early negative writing experiences in school.

The choice of autobiography for this study was an effective tool that allowed the participants to reflect on how their current practices are related to these memories. They wrote with color, clarity, and passion of these early writing experiences. Some participants successfully explored the sources of their anxiety with writing, and others uncovered the origins of their positive writing identity. They also wrote about the importance of the positive relationship between their own comfort level with writing and that of their students’, and that those who did not identify as confident were anxious writing teachers who felt unprepared to teach writing. Their final reflections about their writing journeys and their relationship to their teaching emphasize the idea that they value writing and want to teach it well.

Even those who self-identified as “struggling” or “not a good writer” recognized writing as “an effective tool” and a necessary skill.

Future research could focus on the impact of third through fifth grade teacher interactions with students during the writing process, their feedback for the students’ work, and providing a more flexible writing curriculum. While much research exists on feedback for writing in general, more work could be done that focuses on these years of elementary school that these participants reported were pivotal in their writing identities. Also, the positive influence of family for students who identified as confident writers indicates a need for more research on the benefits of family inclusion in writing assignments to determine its effect on student—and future teacher—writing efficacy.

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## Appendix A

**Writing Autobiography** (*Course Objectives: 3, 5; Assessment: Rubric; Points: 100*): Write a detailed narrative (at least 4 pages) about your writing experiences. Among other elements you may decide to incorporate, please include information about your earliest writings, your school experiences with writing instruction (positive and/or negative), mentors who helped you along the way (see Chapter 1 of Fletcher), what types of writing you regularly participate in whether for work or for pleasure, a self-assessment about the quality of the writing you do, etc. Your autobiography will be completed during the first module and should be submitted through the assignments dropbox. Your autobiography will be graded using the rubric below, which focuses on content and writing style and addresses the qualities of strong reflective writing. Have fun with this, and paint (with words) a genuine picture of you as a writer.

### Writing Autobiography Rubric

Category	<i>Exemplary</i>	<i>Proficient</i>	<i>Developing</i>	<i>Beginning</i>
<b>Introduction</b>	The introduction is inviting, states the main topic, and previews the structure of the paper.	The introduction states the main topic and previews the structure of the paper, but is not particularly inviting to the reader.	The introduction states the main topic, but does not adequately preview the structure of the paper nor is it particularly inviting to the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
<b>Content</b>	Details are placed in logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader. Included information on all required topics.	Details are placed in logical order, but the presentation style sometimes makes the writing less interesting. Included information on all required topics.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader. Included information on most of the required topics.	Many details are not in a logical or expected order. There is little sense that the writing is organized.
<b>Word Choice</b>	Writer uses vivid words and phrases that linger or draw pictures in the reader's mind, and the choice and placement of the words seem accurate, natural and not forced.	Writer uses vivid words and phrases that linger or draw pictures in the reader's mind, but occasionally the words are used inaccurately or seem overdone.	Writer uses words that communicate clearly, but the writing lacks variety, punch or flair.	Writer uses limited vocabulary that does not communicate strongly or capture the reader's interest. Jargon or clichés may be present and detract meaning.
<b>Writing Conventions</b>	No misspellings. No grammatical errors.	Some misspellings and/or some grammatical errors.	Some misspellings and/or some grammatical errors.	Many misspellings or grammatical errors.