

2-1-1996

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### Recommended Citation

Fang, Z. (1996). What Counts as Good Writing? A Case Study of Relationships Between Teacher Beliefs and Pupil Conceptions.. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 36 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol36/iss3/4](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol36/iss3/4)

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# What Counts as Good Writing? A Case Study of Relationships Between Teacher Beliefs and Pupil Conceptions

Zhihui Fang

## Theoretical framework

Influenced by the cognitive revolution in psychology, the popularity of qualitative research paradigm, and the conception of the teacher as a thoughtful professional, teacher education researchers have, in the past decade or so, demonstrated growing interest in aspects of teacher thought processes (e.g., teacher planning and teachers' theories and beliefs) and their relationship to sound pedagogical practices in the classroom. This signals that research on teaching and learning have shifted from a unidirectional emphasis on correlates of observable teacher behavior with student achievement to a focus on teachers' thinking, beliefs, planning, and decision-making processes (Clark and Peterson, 1986). This new line of research has generated findings that are of practical implications for teacher education (Ashton, 1990).

In the field of literacy, researchers have examined how teachers' personal beliefs about teaching and learning affect their decision-making and behaviors (see Fang, 1996 for a

review). While some studies indicate that teachers possess theoretical beliefs toward reading/writing and that such beliefs tend to shape the nature of their instructional practices (Johnson, 1992; Mangano and Allen, 1986; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, and Lloyd, 1991; Rupley and Logan, 1984), others have suggested that because of the constraints of classroom life and social realities, many teachers are not able to provide instruction that is consistent with their beliefs (Davis, Konopak, and Readence, 1993; Duffy and Anderson, 1984; Kinzer, 1988).

Although a growing body of literacy research continues to question whether reading teachers are able to provide instruction which is consistent with their theoretical beliefs, only a few (Melothe, Book, Putnam, and Sivan, 1989; Wing, 1989) have examined connections between teachers' beliefs, instructional decisions, and students' conceptions of reading and writing. Understanding these relationships is important for several reasons (Wing, 1989). First, children's orientation toward literacy may influence how they view and approach reading/writing instructional experience. Children whose conceptions of reading/writing are congruent with the orientation of instructional experiences may be more likely to achieve expected outcomes. Second, elementary teachers may also benefit from knowing that school experience influences children's perceptions about literacy. For example, such knowledge may help them better understand why some children develop a writing style that is consistent over time, so that they can better tailor instruction to individual needs. Third, understanding such relationships may be important for parents too, as they try to decide which school/teacher to send their children to.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between an elementary language arts teacher's beliefs about and her fourth graders' conceptions of good writing.

## **The study**

**Methodology.** The data for this study came from extensive interviews with 15 fourth graders and their language arts teacher from a university laboratory school in a southern state. The teacher has a master's degree in education and several years' elementary teaching experience. She had followed the same group of pupils from the second grade. There were 15 pupils. Semi-structured interviews (Briggs, 1986) were conducted over a period of four weeks, each lasting about 30 minutes. Both the teacher and her pupils were asked questions about their perceptions of what an exemplary piece of writing should be like. Data sets or case records were created for each participant. Inductive analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984) uncovered tentative categories of interest. These categories were then refined through repeated fieldwork and constant comparison. The participants' reports were checked through triangulation.

**Results.** The results of the interviews generally indicate that the teacher's beliefs about writing have considerable impact on the pupils' perceptions of writing. That is, the students' perceptions of what counts as good writing are highly correlated with their teacher's definition of and expectations about exemplary writing.

Specifically, the teacher believed that an exemplary piece of writing should simultaneously address substance, mechanics, and style. According to her, a good piece of writing uses transitional words, sequences right (e.g., go together), has extended vocabulary, is not mundane or sloppy, contains no misspelt words, and paints a vivid picture. In addition, it

must show effort and be able to "jump out at you." The following excerpts from an interview illustrate the teacher's beliefs about exemplary writing.

- Teacher: The first time the student shows it [writing] to you, you look at it ... I look for what they have in comparison to what I think they should have.
- Interviewer: Ok, so you have a model. You have certain kinds of expectations. What are your expectations?
- Teacher: My expectations are that they use extended vocabulary.
- Interviewer: What do you mean?
- Teacher: Use words other than saw and said. You know like he said, they said, we said ... and they have everything they need in order to do what I want (showing a notebook) and this is what they have to use as a guide to keep away from the 'said' thing, so they have this to use.
- Interviewer: Ok, you are expecting them to use your vocabulary?
- Teacher: Yes, they have challenging words from their reading that I expect them to use. And they have transitionals. I've given them a page so they have transitional expressions and sequencing.
- Interviewer: Then your expectations are that they have some kind of extended vocabulary?
- Teacher: I want them to use vocabulary they wouldn't normally use, in second grade, third grade, or fourth grade, they didn't have the material available for them. I've given them what they need to do to think about these things. I want them to develop into better writers. So I give them what they need to do, and they do a lot of writing.
- Interviewer: So, besides providing vocabulary, what kinds of other assistance do you give them?
- Teacher: This is not just vocabulary. They have a writer's guide too. They have all the background stuff they need in order to write, and in the teacher-directed things that we do, that's when I enter, do something like grading a persuasive paragraph, or writing a descriptive paragraph, trying to do certain types of poetry ... we'll do something like that, like something they haven't done before so that they know the format and then after that they can choose whatever they want.

- Interviewer: When you see a student's writing, how do you judge between adequate, inadequate, and exemplary pieces of writing? Do you say this is an exemplary piece of writing, whereas this piece of writing is just sort of inadequate?
- Teacher: Well, I don't think of it in terms of adequate. I think it's acceptable or unacceptable.
- Interviewer: What makes you think that this piece of writing is acceptable?
- Teacher: How do I define that? If something is sloppy or obviously not expressing thoughts; I mean by working with children, you know what they can and cannot do. If something is full of misspelled words, and is not sequenced right or has basic vocabulary, it's not acceptable. But if somebody has put a lot of effort into it, you can see the effort. There may be some mistakes and you work with those mistakes to make it better. Some people come up with things that are just fine. Basically, the piece has to go together.
- Interviewer: What is there in that moment that makes a piece of writing good?
- Teacher: Different things. Sometimes it's just the manner in which the words are put together ... I mean they all fit in together.
- Interviewer: You don't look for structure, the grammar...?
- Teacher: No, it's not just that, but if you read many of these, some of them are going to jump out at you. I mean they will jump out at you in a different way.
- Interviewer: What really jump out at you?
- Teacher: Humor will do that. And the wording will do that. I mean if you have something structured in such a way that it paints a vivid picture in your head, you know it's going to jump out at you. If it's just kind of mundane, it's just mundane.

Consistent with their teacher's beliefs, all of the 15 pupils interviewed said a good piece of writing must have a lot of details (e.g., elaboration, description), be mechanically neat (e.g., mistake-free, no run-on sentences, right punctuation and capitalization), contain challenge words, adventure, fun, and be interesting and "effortful." The vocabulary these pupils used in describing the criteria of good writing bears striking resemblance to that of their teacher's. One response quite

typical of the group was "It (a good piece of writing) has a lot of information, detailed ... and it has no mistakes. It has the right punctuation."

One teacher justified the need for elaboration, saying that it helps paint a vivid picture.

*When you are writing, you should have a little detail in it, mostly so that people can understand. It's good to have elaboration so people can understand better. The book we just read is ever-lasting. It doesn't have any pictures, except in your mind you can see what's happening.*

Another teacher exemplified what elaboration means this way:

*Let's say a child writes about dogs. Dogs are fun. Dogs like to do this, dogs like to do that, dogs make things fun, but the ending is weak. You've got to give full detail so the reader understands and can go home and say 'You know, I'll tell you this, dogs are fun and dogs can do this ... So when you don't give full detail you might hear, 'What did you learn about dogs? Dogs are fun, that's all I've learned.' It's not as good when you lack details or elaboration; readers don't learn anything about your subject.*

Another teacher was able to identify other qualities of good writing such as presence of story grammar and audience orientation.

*Writers have to think of their audience. If it's about war or something and you read it to kindergartners, then, it's not a good story.*

Interestingly, most pupils agreed that a good piece of writing does not have to be long, though a few noted that the longer you write, the more details you'll provide. What matters to them appears to be the amount of effort put in writing the story. For example, when asked the question "How long do you usually write?" most children's responses were invariably given in terms of the amount of time they spent on their story, rather than in terms of the number of pages they wrote. According to some of the teachers, a good piece of writing represents "100 percent effort," which is indicated by absence of grammatical errors, use of challenge words and elaborations.

When asked about the things they look for in rewriting, most pupils reported that they checked for elaborations, use of challenge words, sequencing, in addition to punctuation and capitalization. One student's response to revision is fairly representative:

Interviewer: How do you revise your first draft?

Student: Let's say I had a story about a toad and I say, 'The toad was eating a carrot.' And the second time I read it I say, "You know, I can make it better." I could say 'The fat, fat grubby toad was eating a juicy orange carrot.'

Interviewer: So you add more adjectives.

Student: Yes. More elaboration and details. And then I say, if it's a fat toad eating a juicy carrot, was it a raw carrot or a boiled carrot? What was it? I want more detail so that the reader can see it in their mind. If they don't have the picture you could say "The big fat green grubby toad was eating a raw, tasty, juicy long carrot."

Discussion. Taken together, the findings indicate that the teacher held theoretical beliefs and expectations about the subject she taught and that her pupils have developed clear conceptions of what counts as good writing. Given the striking similarity between the teachers' beliefs about, and the pupils' perceptions of good writing, it is reasonable to suggest



that the teacher beliefs have substantial impact on the pupils' perceptions of literacy. Such influence is likely to have come about through daily instructional practices. As Moore (1985) notes, "The methods, materials, and procedures employed by the teacher operate to form and develop the child" (p. 5).

In light of the close association between teachers' beliefs and pupils' perceptions reported in this case study, it may be beneficial for teacher educators to consider whether pre-service teachers' beliefs are associated with successful learning and how to help them effectively translate their beliefs into sound instructional practice. The issue here is not whether teachers should possess theoretical beliefs about the subject area they teach. They should and do. What is important is to determine whether their knowledge or belief is aligned with sound teaching and learning theories. Rather than simply providing teachers with more theories, teacher educators should help them realize what theory or combination of theories is most effective in promoting student learning. Once teachers are equipped with sound theoretical frameworks about a subject area, the issue then becomes one of how teachers can apply this knowledge in real classrooms where the relationship between theory and practice is complex and where constraints and pressures influence teacher thinking. Teacher educators must help them understand how to cope with the complexities of classroom life and how to apply theory within the constraints imposed by those realities.

## Conclusion

In recent years, research on teachers' theoretical beliefs about content areas has been on the increase (Baldwin, Readence, Schumm, and Konopak, 1990). It is however, still in its infancy (Bean and Zulich, 1993). Sustained efforts are needed in this new area of research on teaching, because, as

Armour-Thomas (1989) boldly predicts, the field promises to "yield information that may revolutionize the way we traditionally conceived the teaching-learning process" (p. 35).

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October 1996  
National Conference on Research in  
Developmental Education

The National Center for Developmental Education announces the Second National Conference on Research in Developmental Education. The conference will be held at the Adam's Mark Hotel in Charlotte, NC, October 23 — 26, 1996. Presented by the National Center for Developmental Education, this conference is also co-sponsored by the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE), the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), and the North Carolina Association for Developmental Studies (NCADS).

The purpose of the conference is to integrate research with practice in the field of developmental education and learning assistance. Although based on research, presentations are designed to help practitioners improve their own developmental courses, programs, and support services for underprepared college students. Proposals for presentations will be accepted through May 1, 1996. Information about the conference may be obtained by calling (704) 262-3057 or writing to the National Conference for Developmental Education, Suite 300, Duncan Hall, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608.

## Correction

In *Reading Horizons* Volume 36, No. 3, "What Counts as Good Writing? A Case Study of Relationships Between Teacher Beliefs and Pupil Conceptions" by Zhihui Fang, pages 254 and 255 the following underlined words should read student instead of teacher:

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