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## WRITING SELF-EFFICACY IN YOUNG CHILDREN: ISSUES FOR THE EARLY GRADES ENVIRONMENT

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**ABSTRACT.** The intent of this study was to examine young children's perceptions of writing self-efficacy (Grades K–1). Most research studies find a significant relationship between self-efficacy and achievement in older students (Grades 4–16). Research has also shown that children are affected by personal perceived self-efficacy. Therefore, self-efficacy can affect young learners as well. There are few self-efficacy studies among young learners, especially kindergarten and first grade. This study was conducted to determine if young learners could describe their writing self-efficacy and, if so, how student perceptions compare to teachers' and researchers' perceptions.

The data showed that participating students from kindergarten and first grade could describe their writing self-efficacy. Several characteristics of children with high and low writing self-efficacy are discussed. Comparisons between teachers', researchers', and children's perceptions of writing self-efficacy showed consistency with 14 of the 18 student participants.

**KEY WORDS:** self-efficacy, writing ability, writing level, young children

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In an earlier work, Lorsbach and Jinks (1999) proposed that student perceptions of the learning environment are influenced by student academic self-efficacy and that an understanding of concepts associated with self-efficacy can lead to an appreciation of what is happening in classrooms and enable researchers, teachers, and students to improve the learning environment. This study was an attempt to understand the self-efficacy beliefs about writing of one group of young students over the course of two academic years. Roth (1998) believes that an understanding of the beliefs of individual students is necessary for improving the learning environment and, consequently, student outcomes. While the notion of student beliefs can be an imposing area of research, we believe that endeavoring to change one aspect of beliefs, self-efficacy, could alter student perceptions of the learning environment. Unlike most belief systems, which can be highly personal, academic self-efficacy is generally a belief-set that is addressable in a classroom context.

Social learning theorists define perceived self-efficacy as a sense of confidence regarding the performance of specific tasks. For example, Bandura

(1986, p. 391) defined the construct as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with the judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses.”

As Bandura (1997) pointed out, self-efficacy is a key factor in human competence. Self-efficacy mediates between beliefs and behaviors. Students with a high sense of self-efficacy exhibit strong achievement, whereas students with a low sense of self-efficacy exhibit the opposite (Schunk, 1981). When students perceive high self-efficacy, they tend to try harder and persevere longer to accomplish the task (Pajares, 2003). According to self-efficacy theories, self-efficacy beliefs are determinants of people’s behavior. When students develop beliefs about their capability, they tend to use the knowledge and skills that they have. Research indicates that, although some students have similar abilities, their outcomes differ because they believe that their capabilities are different.

A growing number of self-efficacy studies have been conducted in the academic areas, such as mathematics and science, but less attention has been given to written composition (Graham, Harris, Fink & MacArthur, 2001; Pajares & Valiante, 1997). Schunk (2003) stated that, to improve writing performance, prerequisite knowledge and skills and high self-efficacy are needed. However, most writing self-efficacy studies have been conducted with upper elementary school, high school, and university undergraduate students. Some self-efficacy-related research has been with young children in the areas of self-care and task independence, motor development and self-efficacy, reflections on early self-efficacy with gifted children, children’s competence, and play therapy intervention (Fall, 1994; Fall, Balvanz, Johnson & Nelson, 1999; Fall & McLeod, 2001; Hildebrand, 1988; Kemple, 1995; Maxwell, 1998). Nonetheless, few studies have been done in the academic areas with younger-aged children.

Perhaps research is not done in early childhood settings because of children’s limited capability in language, physical, and cognitive development. Due to ongoing development of the brain, cognitive thinking skills are not very sophisticated at a young age (2–5 years) (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004; Santrock, 2001). Consequently, attention span is very short and will not be similar to an adult until middle childhood (6–10 years) (Santrock, 2001). As a result, children at a young age might not have the ability to articulate their thoughts in words.

However, even young children, while they are developing their language skills and brain, can express their feelings in words or through their behaviors (Berk, 2002). For instance, young children can tell what they like or dislike about something. Santrock (2001) explained that, through school experiences, children can use “attention-focusing” strategies to help with their attention and stay on the task (p. 241). More and more researchers

believe that there is no distinctive time period when such maturation occurs (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). Hildebrand (1988) also explained that children express whatever they can and often ask for independence while they are doing a task; she found that highly self-efficacious children felt capable of doing the task that he/she was attempting. For these reasons, it is reasonable to investigate if self-efficacy can be developed and enhanced at such an age.

Research shows that self-efficacy promotes motivation and learning. Schunk and Swartz (1993), for instance, examined the effects of learning goals and progress feedback on children's self-efficacy and use of writing paragraphs. The results demonstrated that process goals and feedback helped students to outperform on self-efficacy and writing achievement. Graham and Harris (1989) found that interventions that target writing self-efficacy in Grades 5 and 6 students could lead to improvements in this domain, while Pajares and Valiante (1997) found that elementary students' self-efficacy perceptions predicted their writing performance.

As Pajares (1996) mentioned, acquisition of cognitive skills influences the development of self-efficacy beliefs. If this is true, there is a hope that children will be able to describe their writing self-efficacy as they grow. Pajares and Johnson (1996) and Schunk (1991) have recommended that studies on self-efficacy are needed at lower academic levels at which "these sorts of self beliefs are taking root" (Pajares & Valiante, 1997, p. 354).

## 2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore whether or not young children could describe their writing self-efficacy through words and/or behaviors when they approach writing tasks, and how researchers' and teachers' perceptions are related to students' own perceptions of their writing self-efficacy. Writing self-efficacy beliefs are defined here as individual students' judgments of their competence in writing (Pajares & Johnson, 1994).

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Most of the research relating to self-efficacy has been done with quantitative research methods (i.e. children's own self-report and questionnaires). However, individuals most clearly exhibit their efficacy beliefs through their actions in effort, persistence, and perseverance. Collecting self-reports from students cannot clearly describe how efficacy beliefs influence effort, persistence, and perseverance. Over the last few years, several researchers

have recommended more qualitative research methods (i.e., interviews, case studies, or oral histories) to gain additional insights into self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1991). Munby (1982, 1984) also suggested that qualitative research methods are appropriate and relevant to the study of self-efficacy beliefs.

This study used a qualitative research design to understand if writing self-efficacy could be described in young children and to determine if researchers' and teachers' perceptions of student writing efficacy were consistent with other methods of determining student writing self-efficacy. To determine teacher perceptions, a set of questionnaires from the Self-Efficacy Scale – Teacher Version (SES – TV; Fall & McLeod, 2001) was used as a tool for determining teachers' perceptions of the writing self-efficacy of students.

In evaluating young children's writing self-efficacy, the following research questions were used to guide this study.

1. Can writing self-efficacy beliefs be described in young children?
2. Are there similarities and/or differences in researchers' and teachers' perceptions and children's perceptions of writing self-efficacy?

By investigating these questions, we hoped that an understanding of students' perceptions on writing self-efficacy could lead teachers to differentiate their instruction to enhance writing self-efficacy beliefs in students.

### 3.1. *Methodology: Participants and Setting*

This study took place at Longfellow Elementary School (pseudonym) in the Midwestern USA. Eighteen (18) participants (10 boys, 8 girls) from one kindergarten classroom were followed through their year in Grade 1. Ethnic composition was 14 Caucasian, 1 African-American, 2 Hispanic-American, and 1 Middle-Eastern American. One kindergarten teacher and two first-grade teachers voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

### 3.2. *Data Collection*

The data collected in this study included two interviews (open-ended and semi-structured), observations, analytic memos, and two self-efficacy questionnaires (from three teachers – one kindergarten teacher and two Grade 1 teachers). Analytic memos are long reflections that focus on analysis. When observations are not possible to record, the data are described later, reflecting and remembering what happened at a certain time (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interview questions were concerned with

motivation, effort, specific task difficulties, level of confidence and expectations of success (easiness) or difficulty. Structured open-ended and semi-structured interview questionnaires were adapted from Writing Interview (Rhodes, 1993) and the Morgan-Jinks Student Efficacy Scales (Morgan & Jinks, 1999). Writing interview questions included “What is writing?” and “What makes you a good writer?” The Morgan-Jinks Student Efficacy Scales (MJSES) was designed to gain information about student efficacy beliefs and their relationship to academic success among upper elementary school students (Grades 4–8). However, because this scale was not developed for elementary school children, especially Grades K–1, it was used as a model for developing a set of interview questions for this research. Four teachers (two kindergarten and two first-grade teachers) examined the questions and made recommendations regarding wording of the questions. After pilot interviews with two children, the questions were again revised.

Due to our interest in finding out how teachers’ and researchers’ perceptions compare with students’ perception of writing self-efficacy, a revised version of the Self-Efficacy Scale – Teacher Version (SES – TV, Fall & McLeod, 2001) was adopted. This scale was used solely to compare how the perceptions among students, teachers, and researchers were either similar or different from each other. The SES – TV was not used to generate statistical data. A total of nine items was used, but revised into writing the self-efficacy questionnaire in the Appendix. Three teachers (one kindergarten and two first-grade teachers) reviewed the items and ambiguous items were rewritten to form a more accurate scale.

The revised SES – TV consisted of nine teacher-rated items with the four response alternatives of “Like the child”, “Somewhat like the child”, “Not too much like the child”, and “Not at all like the child”. An example of a scale item is: “When presented with a new task, the child believes he or she can do it.” (For statistical use of this scale, refer to Fall, 1994; Fall et al., 1999; Fall & McLeod, 2001.)

Multiple methods were used to collect data for this study: participant observation of classes over the courses of two academic years (K–1); two formal audiotaped interviews; and various informal interviews with students recorded in field notes and analytic memos. Every interview was audiotaped and transcribed later for analysis. To see how writing self-efficacy and writing in young children were related, a task was given at the beginning of the first interview with the intent of observing how each child would approach the task to determine degree of effort, persistence, and perseverance. The task was to complete a story (sentence) such as “To be a good friend, I can. ...”. To be able to evaluate each child’s writing (other than from the interview), two writing samples were collected throughout each semester.

Teachers' perception of a child's self-efficacy also was examined. The students' kindergarten teacher completed a questionnaire (SES – TV) at the end of the school year for each child in the study. The following year, first-grade teachers filled out the scale along with their reflections on children's attitudes or behaviors, specifically about writing tasks toward the end of the first semester.

### 3.3. *Data Analysis*

Observation field notes, interviews, and analytic memos were categorized, coded and turned into a concept map to assist with data analysis. Each interview with 18 students was transcribed and categorized as themes that have common characteristics. Through follow-up interviews, we checked if students' responses reflected what they mentioned in the first interview. The follow-up interviews were coded through content analysis. Along with interviews, observations were specifically focused on behaviors when students approached writing tasks, such as how much time they took for writing, enthusiasm or interests toward tasks, and comments from students when they worked on writing tasks. Observations of student concentration and interest while they were writing were also examined.

To determine the relationship of writing to self-efficacy, a writing sample was collected from each participating student. It was expected that, if students have high writing self-efficacy, they would write more structured sentences and be better able to express their ideas than low self-efficacy children. The work of Rhodes (1993) and Gentry and Gillet (1993) were used to assess the writing samples. Samples were examined to determine whether students could elaborate their own ideas, the stages of spelling, whether they used conventional spelling or invented (temporary) spelling, if students could write in full structured sentences, what types (kind) of vocabulary (two or three syllable words) they used, if they correctly used punctuation, and their ability to stay on task until the story was completed. After coding the data, the findings of this study were represented as assertions. Supporting and refuting evidence was accumulated for each assertion, which was reformulated as data were collected and analysis progressed.

Scoring of the Self-Efficacy Scale – Teacher Version (SES – TV) involved summing the scores after taking into account reverse scoring on Items 2, 4, and 7. For items 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9, "Like the child" is given 4 points, "Somewhat like the child" is given 3 points, "Not too much like the child" is given 2 points, and "Not at all like the child" is given 1 point. Total scores range from 9 to 36, with higher scores representing higher levels of self-efficacy. After collecting data from the three teachers, the students' self-efficacy scales were scored as recommended by Fall and

McLeod (2001). For analysis, the 18 students were split into high, moderate, and low self-efficacy, according to the teacher rating on the SES – TV. A score of 18 and below was considered to represent low self-efficacy and a score of 30 and above was considered as high self-efficacy.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. *Writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Young Learners*

The following assertions evolved during exploration of the first research question: “Can writing self-efficacy beliefs be described in young children?” Characteristics such as behavior patterns, willingness to try, length of time to complete a writing task, and the level of writing were used to answer this research question.

#### 4.1.1. *Assertion 1: Characteristics of High and Low Writing Self-Efficacy Behavior Patterns in Young Students are Similar to Those Found in the Research Literature for Older Students*

Children with low writing self-efficacy tended to easily be distracted from activities by wandering around the classroom when they were supposed to be writing, avoiding writing tasks, following whatever prompts their teacher gave them, giving up easily, and either taking a lot of time to write or little time at all. Justin, Mark, Gavin, and Jennifer were the students who demonstrated low writing self-efficacy behaviors. From the interview, Justin said: “Actually, I’m not feeling good about my writing. It’s hard. I don’t like it that much.” His interview statements fit with his behavior – Justin tried very hard to get away from writing, by fighting, cursing, or displaying anger towards his teacher and/or his classmates. Vinnie was another example of a student who exhibited low self-efficacy behaviors. Vinnie spent little time thinking deeply when he wrote. He usually followed the teacher’s direction and/or prompts, which made him feel more at ease about writing because he frequently had difficulties. He mentioned in the interview that he likes to follow the teacher’s suggestions, and not to think for himself.

Students who exhibited high self-efficacy also tended to confirm the results of research done in the past with older learners. Jason, Brandon, Adriana, Annabelle, Samantha, Alan, Travis, and Corinna exhibited a willingness to try, were risk-takers, spent longer time to complete a task, were eager to participate in writing, and wanted to get a good grade. For example, Brandon stated: “I try hard because I can learn to write and spell better.” Samantha also stated: “I just can’t give up. I just got to ask someone and try

on my own.” Maxwell (1998) found a similar result: high self-efficacy students were more likely to possess high expectations and produce behaviors to perform well. Pajares (2003) explained that high self-efficacy students put an effort into their writing to do well. Schunk (1991) and Bandura (1993) stated that high writing self-efficacy students were comfortable and confidently approach the task, but low self-efficacy students tried to avoid the task. Bandura (1986, 1997) also mentioned that, while low self-efficacy students experienced stress and ineffectiveness when they confronted difficulties, high self-efficacy students demonstrated greater effort to overcome obstacles.

As Pajares (1996) suggested that assessing students’ self-efficacy could provide teachers with important insights. If writing self-efficacy beliefs can be detected in young children, there could be a possibility that elementary school teachers can help younger children to develop or/and enhance their writing self-efficacy beliefs. By observing children’s behaviors and conversing with children, teachers and researchers might be able to identify low and high writing self-efficacy in young children. In that way, teachers could implement strategies for enhancing students’ self-efficacy and for appropriate intervention for the students.

#### 4.1.2. *Assertion 2: Unwillingness to Accomplish a Task was Only Evident in Low and High Self-Efficacy Students, Not in Those Classified as Having Moderate Self-Efficacy Beliefs*

While behaviors of the high and low self-efficacy students in this study were consistent with research in older children (Pajares, 1996; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan, Gheen & Midgley, 1998; Schunk, 1983) some interesting patterns emerged that pertain to the young learners in this study. When the children approached a writing task, similar behavior patterns appeared between children with high and low self-efficacy in writing.

Some students in both groups, at times, seemed unmotivated and avoided tasks. Interviews and continued observation showed that, while these two groups of students exhibited the same overt behaviors, they did so for different reasons. Students who exhibited a high sense of writing self-efficacy were more likely to be unmotivated because they lost interest in the task, while students who showed a low sense of writing self-efficacy were more likely to be unmotivated due to the difficulty level of the task. This seemed a convincing argument against classroom practices that ‘teach to the middle’.

Students in this study with high self-efficacy were not always motivated if a task was too easy for them, or if they had to narrowly follow the teacher’s direction and/or topic. If they did, they often lost interest. Lorsbach (1992) found a similar circumstance in the case study of Alan,



a seventh grader. Alan felt that he already knew the science subject being taught, so he did not put in effort to do the assignment because there was little for him to learn. Some children from this study with a high sense of writing self-efficacy showed similar behaviors when they approached a task. For instance, Samantha, a high writing self-efficacy student, sometimes acted bored and tended to do something else (i.e. draw, read, sing) while the teacher explained what children needed to write. Samantha said that she felt that the topic was “boring and easy”, and she had to “wait for everyone to get the idea”. Waiting for others or having a boring topic reduced her interest, and so she exhibited difficulties in finishing her assignments.

When some low self-efficacy children from this study met repeated difficulties, they gave up easily and tried to avoid the task. This was consistent with the research with older students (Pajares & Johnson, 1996). Graham, Harris and Fink-Chorzempa (2000), for example, found that children in elementary grades avoided writing and developed a mindset that they could not write when struggling with handwriting. Justin’s case, for example, supported these findings. From the interview, Justin commented: “I don’t like to try to do it because it’s so hard. So, I just don’t do it sometimes. I don’t ask for help because I don’t want no-one to know about it (that he cannot write). I don’t like asking people to help me because then people tease me.” Justin had low writing self-efficacy, and so he tried really hard not to write and often engaged in other behaviors so that he could avoid writing. Because he did not have good writing skills and could not write well, he often withdrew from writing activities. Justin’s learned helplessness was a way in which he could remove himself from writing situations. It appeared that his low self-efficacy led to his many classroom misbehaviors.

Students with low writing self-efficacy avoided a task when they felt that a task was too difficult to accomplish. Students like Gavin and Justin were likely to withdraw from a task and give up before they started to write. They perceived themselves as low achievers who often could not do what was asked. As a result, they often engaged in off-task behaviors that interrupted the learning of others. Jennifer, who also exhibited low writing self-efficacy, avoided some writing tasks. She took a long time to complete some writing tasks so that she could put her work away – unfinished – when the teacher told children to clean up. She was willing to deal with her writing difficulties later. Cain and Dweck (1995) also reported that some children gave up easily because of their perceptions that they cannot accomplish a task that is deemed to be too difficult. Whereas both high and low self-efficacy students exhibited distinct behaviors that indicated an unwillingness to accomplish a task, this did not appear to be a concern for moderate students. When researchers and teachers study motivation and on-task time in an effort to determine student self-efficacy in young children, it could be worthwhile to look at reasons behind the behaviors.

4.1.3. *Assertion 3: The Length of Time Taken to Complete a Writing Task is Related to the Levels of High and Low Self-Efficacy*

Throughout the study, those students with either high or low self-efficacy took a longer time to complete a task than those deemed as having moderate writing self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) reported that students with high self-efficacy tend to expand efforts and persist longer at a learning task than those who doubt their capabilities. Morgan and Jinks (1999) indicated that students with high self-efficacy try different strategies when they meet difficulties and this leads to greater effort and success, but low self-efficacy children tend to give up more easily, leading to lower success.

However, this study yielded results inconsistent with other self-efficacy studies. Both high and low writing self-efficacy students took longer to complete a task than the moderate self-efficacy students (when choosing to try to complete a task). Therefore, results for younger children might differ from research conducted with older children. Counter to Bandura's (1986) and Pajares's (2003) findings, high self-efficacious students in this study took longer because they liked to write or/and wanted their writing to be, in their view, "perfect and neat", but low self-efficacious children stayed longer because they had difficulties with the writing task. Annabelle, who had high writing self-efficacy took longer to finish a writing task than many students, not because she had trouble writing, but because she made an effort to write well and had "so many ideas" that she wanted to write down. Mark, on the other hand, stayed on task longer because he "didn't know what to write". Much of Mark's time was spent trying to figure out what to write. Justin also stayed on task longer or gave up and quit writing. Moderate self-efficacy students were not among those taking the longest time to complete a writing task.

Kindergarten and first graders exhibited behaviors similar to junior high school students. Like older learners (Graham et al., 2000; Ryan et al., 1998), children in this study with low self-efficacy exhibited task avoidance and learned helplessness. But, some young children with low self-efficacy displayed actions (e.g. asking for help) that are characteristic of high self-efficacy older children. It seems that young children with low self-efficacy exhibited a broader range of behaviors than those found in older students.

Teachers of young learners might need to give high self-efficacy students more time to complete a task because those students have capabilities to persist and put in effort while they work on a task. Similarly, teachers need to modify their teaching strategies to help low self-efficacy children. Low self-efficacy children take longer to finish a task because they struggle, not because they like to write. Therefore, teachers might provide them with more ideas and guidance so that they can complete a task with less frustration. Guiding low self-efficacy children with brainstorming ideas and prompts need to be continued to enhance their writing self-efficacy.

4.1.4. *Assertion 4: Students' Writing Level is an Indicator of Their Level of Writing Self-Efficacy*

A comparison of the writing stages of high and low self-efficacy children revealed that students with high self-efficacy had a higher level of writing development than low self-efficacy children. High self-efficacy children seemed to possess the rules of convention and punctuation, tended to have precise ideas about sounding out the words, and maintained a better focus when they wrote. The higher the level of writing development that they have, the more likely they were to have higher self-efficacy beliefs. Samantha, Jason, Brandon, and Kelly exhibited a high sense of self-efficacy and their writing levels were from phonetic to transitional spelling stage. Figure 1 shows that Brandon's spelling stage is in a transitional stage to becoming a conventional stage.

Students with low writing self-efficacy demonstrated less writing skills and had not developed knowledge of the rules of conventions. Children who are in the stages of precommunicative and semiphonetic appeared to have lower writing self-efficacy; their writing ability seemed to make them very insecure – these students wrote really short stories and conveyed the whole meaning of sentences with three or four letters. Figures 2 and 3 represent the precommunicative and semiphonetic spelling of Mark and Justin.

Mark and Justin were comfortable in kindergarten even though they could not write because the environment was less demanding of their writing skills. But not having writing skills in Grade 1 seemed to affect their confidence and, consequently, their writing self-efficacy was low. Not being an able writer at the kindergarten level might not affect writing self-efficacy beliefs; however, it appears that, as the students moved to first grade, not being able to write seemed to affect writing self-efficacy beliefs.

To be a good friend, I can be GOOD

Figure 1. Transitional spelling by Brandon.

To be a good friend, I can ach ni

Figure 2. Semiphonetic spelling by Mark: "Help each other."

To be a good friend, I can ht ni

Figure 3. Precommunicative spelling by Justin: "Help them."

#### 4.2. *Teachers' and Researchers' Perceptions*

In order to see if there were similarities and/or differences among teachers, researchers, and children's perceptions of writing self-efficacy, three different strategies were used. The Self-Efficacy Scale was completed by three teachers (one kindergarten and two first-grade teachers) who participated in this study. Interviews, observations, and analytic memos were recorded throughout the study. While interviewing children, questions that related to perceptions of writing self-efficacy were asked to each student participant.

##### 4.2.1. *Assertion 5: There Were More Similarities Than Differences in Perceptions of Writing Self-Efficacy Among Teachers, Students, and Researchers*

The perceptions of teachers and researchers were based upon children's attitudes and behaviors toward writing when they approached and completed a task. The results from the Self-Efficacy Scale for 18 students were divided into three groups. Table I shows the overall perceptions of teachers, researchers, and children from this study.

TABLE I  
Perceptions of Self-Efficacy Ratings Among Teachers, Students, and Researchers

Student	Students' own perceptions	Kindergarten teachers' perceptions	Grade 1 teachers' perceptions	Researchers' perceptions
Samantha	High	Moderate	High	High
Seth	Moderate/high	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Vinnie	High	Moderate	Low	Low
Adriana	High	High	High	High
Jason	High	High	High	High
Annabelle	High	High	High	High
Gavin	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Low
Thomas	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Mark	Low	Moderate	Low	Low
Corinna	High	Low	High	High
Alice	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Ashley	High	High	High	High
Brandon	High	High	High	High
Jennifer	Low	Moderate	High	Low
Alan	High	Moderate	High	High
Justin	Low	Low	Low	Low
Travis	High	Low	High	High
Shauna	High	Low	Moderate	Moderate

From Table I, it appears that three teachers and the researchers had similar perceptions on children's writing self-efficacy. From observations and discussions with the teachers, we could conclude that most students' description and perceptions of their writing self-efficacy were similar to those of their teachers and the researchers. Fourteen of the 18 perceptions were consistent across students, teachers and researchers.

One can see that some children's self-efficacy changed from kindergarten to first grade. It appeared that Corinna and Travis gained higher self-efficacy when they acquired the ability to read and write. It seemed that, because both students gained a tremendous amount of writing and reading skills over time, the confidence in their writing improved their self-efficacy level.

Fall and McLeod (2001) indicated that there was a general tendency for students to rate themselves more highly than teachers rated them after a comparison of teacher and student ratings on self-efficacy. This study confirmed that students like Vinnie, Gavin, and Shauna rated themselves more highly than the teachers and researchers. This could be explained, in part, by how these children defined writing. Vinnie, Gavin, and Shauna defined writing as knowing the alphabet, while students with a high self-efficacy and a higher level of writing development defined writing as a way to communicate what they were thinking. Given how Vinnie, Gavin and Shauna defined writing, it is not surprising that they perceived themselves as confident in their abilities. These findings are similar to those of Graham, Schwartz and MacArthur (1993) who found that Grades 4–8 students defined good writing as spelling words correctly. How young learners conceptualize writing appears to be one problem when studying young children. This is an area in need of further study.

Bandura (1993), Pajares and Valiante (1997), and Schunk (2003) suggested in their research that self-efficacy beliefs influenced behavior, choice of tasks, persistence, and perseverance when children met with difficulties. They suggested that students' own perceptions of their writing self-efficacy appeared to influence behaviors and attitudes. This study seemed to confirm that, by observing such behaviors, teachers could determine most children's writing self-efficacy with some accuracy.

As Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) reported, even children as young as first grade exhibit consistent self-efficacy beliefs regardless of their self-efficacy level. Children who learned to read and write between kindergarten and first grade were very likely to have a higher self-efficacy than they did as non-readers. Similarly, Hildebrand (1988) found that young children's self-efficacy can be learned while they are developing cognitive capacities and motor skills. This research supports the idea that, by observing children's behaviors and attitudes when children approach a writing task, teachers and researchers seem able to exhibit accuracy in determining a child's perceived self-efficacy level. Therefore, although there were

minor discrepancies among the teachers and researchers, there was consistency among student perceptions, their kindergarten teacher, their first-grade teacher (the children's most recent teacher), and researchers.

According to Fall and McLeod (2001), identifying children with low self-efficacy at the beginning of their school years and focusing efforts on increasing and fostering self-efficacy could result in an improvement in learning. Therefore, if teachers can classify each student's level of self-efficacy, it could lead teachers to use strategies to help children to enhance their self-efficacy. For instance, by knowing several characteristics of students with high self-efficacy, such as effort, persistence, and perseverance, teachers can employ several strategies for a child's appropriate self-efficacy level regarding topics and writing instructions.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study sought to determine whether young children (Grades K–1) could describe their writing self-efficacy and whether teachers', researchers', and children's perceptions of writing self-efficacy would be similar or different. In describing young children's writing self-efficacy (research question one), the participants of this study seemed to be able to describe their level of writing self-efficacy through actions, attitudes, and language.

Such behaviors were similar to those found in previous studies. Students with low, moderate and high writing self-efficacy demonstrated a set of similar characteristics and behaviors to those found by other researchers, but perhaps for different reasons. There was an unwillingness to accomplish a task on the part of high and low writing self-efficacy children. Low self-efficacy children were more likely to avoid a task than those who were not. It also seemed that a prolonged length of time to finish a task characterized students with high and low writing self-efficacy levels. Both low and high writing self-efficacy children took a long time to complete a task, but high self-efficacy students took longer in order to do well, while the low self-efficacy students took longer because they were 'stuck' (i.e. they didn't know how to accomplish the task). Writing level seemed to indicate and influence the level of writing self-efficacy in this group of students. Gaining reading and writing skills made students feel more confident and thus seemed to promote their writing self-efficacy. On the other hand, difficulties with writing ability reduced engagement of writing activities and reduced writing self-efficacy.

Similarities and differences between teachers', researchers', and students' perceptions of writing self-efficacy were generally consistent with the literature. The teachers' and researchers' perceptions were in relatively

high agreement with students' writing self-efficacy. Discrepancies seemed to indicate a difference in how writing was defined by the learner. This study seems to show that close observation of the actions of students by teachers with knowledge of the concept of self-efficacy might enable detection of children's writing self-efficacy and hence identification of ways in which to help students to increase writing self-efficacy.

The learning environment literature is replete with studies indicating the importance of student perceptions. How the young children in this study perceived themselves as learners influenced how they interacted in their environment. This exploratory study indicates a need for further study of writing self-efficacy in young children. More research is needed on how specific teaching practices influence student perceptions of writing self-efficacy and, in turn, perceptions of the learning environment.

Graham and Harris (1997) emphasized the importance of perceptions of actors within the classroom environment. Future studies need to investigate further how environmental factors can affect children's learning and enhance or decrease writing self-efficacy. With a more robust research literature, we could be able to determine what classroom environments look like that address individual academic self-efficacy of young learners. This study shows that being aware of writing self-efficacy in young children could be important to educators. Teachers are likely to be able to restructure the learning environment by providing different learning strategies to children. Without knowing and understanding writing self-efficacy, teachers could limit their abilities to improve writing instruction.

APPENDIX  
REVISED SELF-EFFICACY SCALE FOR WRITING:  
TEACHER VERSION

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Commented and measured by: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Male/Female)  
 Date of birth or age: \_\_\_\_\_ Race: \_\_\_\_\_

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This scale assesses how a child approaches a given writing task. Teachers need to rate a child's attitude and behavior toward writing. This self-efficacy scale is focused only on the writing competence of children.

Directions for teachers: Please read the following statements and fill in the dot beside the most correct answer.

1. When the child is unable to write something that is given to them for the first time, the child persists in seeking solutions.

- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child
2. Sometimes, when the child has the skills to accomplish tasks, he or she doesn't appear to believe that he/she can do projects or assignments.
- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child
3. The child makes choices easily about what to write.
- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child
4. The child tends to blame others for personal failure.
- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child
5. The child has confidence in his/her personal abilities.
- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child
6. When presented with a new task, the child believes that he or she can do it.
- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child
7. The child gives up easily when he/she feels that the task is difficult to write about.



- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child
8. The child appears to like challenges.
- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child
9. When you give the child a task, he or she eagerly approaches it.
- Like the child
  - Somewhat like the child
  - Not too much like the child
  - Not at all like the child

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