



Writing Performance as a Function of Self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

In order to become successful members of society in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, students must be able to write effectively. However, many students are unwilling or unable to write by the time they leave high school. Two major factors linked to writing performance include writing self-efficacy beliefs. The current study endeavours to conceptualize the relationship between self-efficacy and writing performance. The paper posit a positive relation between writing self-efficacy and writing performance. The study concludes its premises by suggesting topics of interest for future research.

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Introduction

In Saudi Arabia, writing is an important skill in order to be a productive member of society. Yet, more and more students leave high school unwilling or unable to write. This is also true of younger children: according to a report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, from 2002, students who were tested in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades were found to be below grade-level for writing. Only 28% of fourth graders were found to be performing at or above proficient in 2002 (Al-hazimi, Awdah, Abdulmonem Al-hyani, & Sue Roff, 2004). In 2007, only 33% of eighth graders were found to be at or above proficient status for writing, and only 24% of twelfth graders were at or above proficient status for writing (fourth graders were not involved in the 2007 study). Proficient status for this study indicates writing competency (Al-Jarf, 2008). Despite this data, writing has not been a focus for school reform, nor is it a focus during the school day, with a median time of 20 minutes spent writing every day.

The writing process consists of several stages that the writer goes through when producing a piece of writing: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Writing instruction focuses on guiding students through the process, and helping them acquire the skills needed to accomplish each step. For example, in order to edit, students will learn rules about punctuation, so that they can edit their own writing for this area. Additionally, in this study, instruction focuses on the six plus one traits of writing. These six traits are ideas, voice, word choice, conventions, organization and sentence fluency. Students learn how to attend to and improve these six traits in their own writing. The “plus one” refers to the presentation of the writing piece, which corresponds to the publishing step of the writing process.

Writing instruction in the primary grades focuses on both writing products and the writing process. It begins as early as preschool (Al-Jarf, 2008). As students learn, they start out as novice writers and become more expert. Further, primary students’ skills in all parts of the writing process develop, including planning and revising (see Graham & Harris, 2000). In a study where children were interviewed about their attitudes towards writing, Knudson (1995) found that many first graders view writing as drawing, while others view writing as adult

writing. Second graders may also view writing more as printing. However, second graders do understand that the purpose of writing is to communicate, and can also describe many different types of writing tasks (Shook, Marrion, & Ollila, 1989). Second graders focus on writing sentences and begin writing paragraphs, while third grade students continue to focus on writing a clear paragraph, with all of its attendant parts (Matsumura, Patthey-Chavez, Valdes, & Garnier, 2002).

Teachers in elementary school focus on the mechanics of writing as well as the content. Spelling and handwriting may affect writer’s development (Graham & Harris, 2000). Primary students often centre on the mechanics of writing, particularly as a focal point for improving their writing (Knudson, 1995). Students interviewed in Knudson’s study discussed addressing only mechanics or presentation aspects of writing in order to improve. In third grade, mechanics continues to be a focus, where students are expected to conform more to standard writing practice, in terms of spelling and grammar (Matsumura et. al, 2002).

Teachers also focus on writing strategy instruction. Examples of strategies include using graphic organizers to organize thoughts before writing, conferencing with a peer to determine what to add or change about the writing, and monitoring self-progress during writing. Students also learn general strategies for developing the six traits of writing. Many of the strategies focused on during instruction are self-regulatory strategies. Self-regulated writers monitor and direct their own thinking and writing behaviours (including the use of writing strategies) throughout the writing process, to achieve a particular goal.

Many different motivational factors can affect writing performance in addition to cognitive factors. One of the most influential factors is self-efficacy beliefs. However, teachers do not always focus on motivational factors when teaching writing, but instead focus on the writing process or even just writing products. Self-efficacy beliefs are exceedingly important in terms of writing and even in everyday life. For example, self-efficacy beliefs can affect health, cognitive factors, career development, and academics (Bandura, 1997). They predict writing performance but also have far-reaching effects. Self-efficacy beliefs can affect perceived usefulness of writing and

writing apprehension, both of which are key factors in terms of writing performance (Pajares & Valiante, 1999). To date, there are few studies of writing self-efficacy in young children; the current study addresses this gap in the literature. Current research supports the idea that writing motivation can shape the development of writing performance, and it has been found that "individual differences in motivation predict writing," (Graham, 2006, p. 467). Indeed, many current theoretical models of writing contain concepts of motivation and self-efficacy (Graham, Berninger, & Fan, 2007; Hayes, 1996; Pajares, 2003). In the following, the researcher posit, albeit, extrapolating on existing research, the nexus between self-efficacy and writing performance.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Bandura (1997) asserts that "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than what is objectively true" (p.2). In other words, if a person holds certain beliefs about him or herself, then he or she will act upon those self-beliefs, regardless of their accuracy. Thus, self-beliefs will affect all areas of human life and behaviour. For example, a person's self-efficacy beliefs affect how a person thinks, feels, acts, and is motivated (Bandura, 1996). The importance of self-beliefs is undeniable. These assertions indicate the importance of research in the area of self-beliefs, so that teaching practices will be current and will not neglect this integral concept.

One of the primary components of self-beliefs is self-efficacy. Bandura, who is commonly regarded in the educational research community as the foremost researcher in the subject, put forth the following definition of self-efficacy: "Beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p.3). Self-efficacy beliefs affect what people do. To explain, what people choose to do centres on what they believe about what they can accomplish. Self-efficacy acts as a mediator between people's beliefs and their behaviours (Bandura, 1997).

Sources of Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Bandura also put forth the idea that self-efficacy comes from four sources (Bandura, 1997). The first, and most influential, of these sources is enactive mastery experience. Enactive mastery experience is based on successes and failures. Successes lead to a stronger belief in a person's self-efficacy, while failures have the opposite effect, weakening a person's self-efficacy beliefs. For example, a student successfully writes a short story for the first time, leading to a stronger sense of self-efficacy for writing short stories. Another influential source is the second, vicarious experience. A person's self-efficacy beliefs can come from observations of actions performed by others. Upon observation, a person accordingly compares his or her abilities to the abilities of others, and uses this information as a social comparison to form his or her own self-efficacy beliefs. For example, the student writing a story notes that another student is able to write her story more quickly than he does, leading to a diminished sense of self-efficacy. The third source is verbal persuasion. While not the most influential of the four sources, as it only somewhat affects self-efficacy, it still remains an important basis for self-efficacy beliefs. Verbal persuasion involves a person receiving feedback from another person that convinces him or her of his or her ability to perform a particular task. An example of this would be the above student's teacher complimenting him on his writing proficiency, leading to improved self-efficacy beliefs. Finally, the last source described by Bandura is physiological and affective states. These, also, are only partly responsible for changes in self-efficacy. In order for

a person to determine his or her ability for a task, the person may look to his or her physiological or emotional condition. He or she takes into account his or her physical feedback as well as mood. For example, when the student above feels "stressed" or unhappy while writing, he interprets this to mean that he lacks competency. These four sources of input constitute the basis of a person's self-efficacy beliefs.

Effects of Self-efficacy Beliefs

Self-efficacy beliefs influence the extent to which a given student will succeed or progress. They can affect the actions a person chooses to take, the effort a person puts into activities, perseverance in a task, persistence in the face of difficulties, and what a person ultimately accomplishes (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Pajares & Valiante, 1997). Therefore, a person with high self-efficacy beliefs would be more likely to persist at that task, put forth more effort into it, continue working on the task for a longer period of time, and would experience more successes. A person with low self-efficacy. Additionally, self-efficacy relates to other aspects of motivation. Discussion of it and its impacts can be found throughout many different types of motivational theory, such as goal theory and attribution theory. For instance, Bandura found that self-efficacy beliefs influence causal attributions and the goals people create (Bandura, 1994). As self-efficacy consists in part of a person's perceptions of how well they can accomplish certain tasks, they need to set a standard that would indicate if they were doing well or not. When students achieve or meet the standards or goals they have set, that could lead to increased self-efficacy. In Bandura and Schunk's (1981) study, they examined the effects of proximal sub-goals on perceptions of competence, self-efficacy and interest for mathematics for students between seven and ten years of age. Students who made their proximal sub-goals increased significantly in their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). It seems likely that this would be possible for the area of writing, as well.

The construct of self-efficacy is one that demonstrates influence across many academic domains. Bandura (1997) described how self-efficacy beliefs need to match the domain of performance. That is, self-efficacy beliefs about writing need to match, or measure, writing performance and not reading performance. Bandura would recommend measuring those self-efficacy beliefs, then, at the domain level. Therefore, self-efficacy can be said to be specific to certain domains, such as writing.

Writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs

A primary and most essential academic domain is writing. As previously mentioned, motivational concepts are key for academic success in writing, and one of the most important and influential motivational concepts is self-efficacy. In a study that evaluated students with and without learning disabilities, Graham, Schwartz and put forth as much effort into the task, and would experience more failures. The level of a person's self-efficacy beliefs can have a positive or negative effect on achievement. Bandura (1986) asserted that students with high self-efficacy tend to demonstrate strong achievement, while students with low self-efficacy demonstrate weaker achievement. Various studies have documented this relationship (e.g., Pajares, 1997). A student who possesses positive self-efficacy may tend to view a demanding task as a challenge, while students with negative self-efficacy may tend to avoid tasks they perceive as too challenging (Bandura, 1994; Kim & Lorschbach, 2005). Such students also give up easily when faced with difficulties (Bandura, 1997; Kim & Lorschbach, 2005). MacArthur (1993) found that, for all students, motivation was

most commonly cited as the reason for writing difficulty. Also, a positive relationship has been shown between writing and self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares, 2003; Shell, Bruning & Colvin, 1995); when students believe they can write well, they do write better. However, writing self-efficacy beliefs cannot be defined in exactly the same manner as self-efficacy beliefs. Rather, writing self-efficacy represents a person's beliefs about his or her ability to write, or to produce certain types of text (Hidi, Berndorff, & Ainley, 2002; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994).

A person's belief in his ability to write is essential to writing motivation and performance (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Pajares, 2003). For example, Pajares and Valiante (1997) conducted a study involving 218 fifth grade students. In this study, they utilized the Writing Skills Self-Efficacy Scale (Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989), an adaptation of Daly and Miller's 1975 Writing Apprehension Test, a writing performance measure, the Perceived Usefulness of Writing scale, and teacher ratings of writing aptitude. They asserted that writing self-efficacy influences students' perceived usefulness of writing. This suggests that if students have greater self-efficacy, they would be more likely to perceive writing as useful when compared with those with lower self-efficacy. Additionally, the researchers found that self-efficacy perceptions of elementary students contributed to the prediction of their writing performance. Further, Shell, Bruning and Colvin (1995), in a study of fourth, seventh, and tenth grade students, found that higher writing achievement was related to positive self-efficacy beliefs. Even among lower achievers, students who had higher self-efficacy beliefs demonstrated higher achievement than those with lower self-efficacy. The students took the Writing Skills Self-Efficacy scale (adapted from an earlier study by the same authors), outcome expectancy instruments, causal attributions measures for reading and writing, and the achievement test. In a longitudinal study, Kim and Lorschach (2005) examined 18 students from kindergarten to first grade, using interviews, observations, analytic memos, writing samples, and two teacher self-efficacy surveys. The researchers found that generally, the students with greater self-efficacy demonstrated a more advanced writing level than those students with lesser self-efficacy. Pajares (2003) also suggested that self-efficacy beliefs and writing performance are positively related in his review of the literature.

Just as with self-efficacy beliefs in general, self-efficacy beliefs can have a negative or positive impact on writing. Kim and Lorschach (2005) found that students who had high writing self-efficacy beliefs spent more time on a writing task, were motivated to earn a good grade and to participate in writing tasks, were willing to try, and were more willing to take risks than those with low self-efficacy. Students with a higher sense of writing self-efficacy also demonstrated a greater degree of writing development than those with lower self-efficacy for writing. The converse was also true, in that those students who demonstrated a greater degree of writing development were likely to have more enhanced self-efficacy beliefs. Additionally, in Hidi, Ainley, Berndorff and Del Favero's (2007) intervention study, researchers noted that students' self-efficacy for writing was positively related to quality and length of their written compositions. In order to determine this, students were given writing assessments, a computer program which monitored responses to the writing, two self-efficacy for writing tasks, and two interest measures. Their results suggest that the more self-efficacious a student feels towards writing, the longer and better their compositions will be. However, students who demonstrate poorer writing achievement possess lower self-efficacy than

students who demonstrate higher writing achievement (Shell et al., 1995). In Kim and Lorschach's 2005 longitudinal study, these students with lower self-efficacy exhibited more negative behaviours, including a tendency to be distracted more easily or to quit, task avoidance, rushing through a writing task or taking an extended time to complete the task. An additional assertion made by Kim and Lorschach (2005) is that students who were classified as having low or high self-efficacy were sometimes unwilling to finish the writing tasks, but for different reasons. In certain instances, the high self-efficacy students were unmotivated due to lack of challenge, while the low self-efficacy students were unmotivated because they were too challenged. However, those students with medium levels of self-efficacy for writing did not demonstrate the same unwillingness to complete writing tasks.

Sources of writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Some research has focused on sources of self-efficacy beliefs for the domain of writing. Pajares, Johnson, and Usher (2007) conducted a study involving 1256 students from fourth through eleventh grades, who completed an adapted Sources of Self-Efficacy scale, and whose teachers rated the students on writing competence. Pajares et al. showed that the four sources enumerated by Bandura had a significant correlation with both writing self-efficacy and the other sources. Knowing that mastery experience is the most influential of the sources for general self-efficacy, Pajares et al. found this to be true for writing self-efficacy as well. The sources of mastery experience, vicarious experience, and social persuasions predicted writing self-efficacy for all students involved in their study. These three sources were also stronger predictors for elementary school than middle or high school.

In addition, verbal persuasion plays an important role in writing, since motivational development may be affected when students receive public feedback on their writing performance (Wilson & Trainin, 2007). However, Wilson and Trainin also found, for their sample of 98 first graders from four different schools, that students currently do not receive much feedback during group writing instruction, thereby limiting their ability to make social comparisons and diminishing the influence of this source. Their study employed the Early Literacy Motivation Scale, with subscales about perceived competence, self-efficacy, and attributions.

Writing self-efficacy is also related to other motivational constructs. For example, writing self-efficacy is related to other components of self-belief in general, such as apprehension, perceived value of writing, and self-concept (Pajares & Valiante, 1997; Pajares, Valiante, & Cheong, 2007). Additionally, writing self-efficacy is related to self-efficacy for self-regulation, having mastery goals and grade goals, and processing depth (see Pajares, 2003). Thirdly, in an intervention study investigating writing self-efficacy, interest, and argument writing in children, Hidi et al. (2002) found that interest in writing, writing enjoyment in different genres, and self-efficacy are positively correlated. For these grade six students, the researchers used a questionnaire developed by themselves, the Interest, Liking and Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, as well as writing prompts given before and after the intervention.

Discussion

Writing self-efficacy changes over the course of a student's development (Shell et al., 1995). However, current research differs regarding whether self-efficacy increases, decreases, or remains constant with age. In Pajares' (2003) review, some studies indicated that self-efficacy for writing increased with age while others indicated that self-efficacy for writing actually

decreased with age. In Shell et al.'s study, students in the 7th and 11th grades demonstrated higher writing task self-efficacy than students in fourth grade, with the eleventh graders demonstrating higher task self-efficacy than the seventh graders as well. Pajares and Valiante (1999) found students in 6th grade to have higher self-efficacy beliefs than older middle school students. Their study involved 742 sixth through eighth graders who completed the Writing Skills Self-Efficacy Scale, Marsh's Academic Self-Description Questionnaire, Daly and Miller's Writing Apprehension Test, and the Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning Questionnaire, and whose teachers completed ratings of student competence. However, Pajares, Johnson, et al. (2007) found that self-efficacy beliefs declined over time. Pajares, Valiante, et al. (2007) also asserted that writing self-efficacy beliefs declined over time, while remaining steady at high school. Their study involved students from grades four through eleven. They also completed the Writing Skills Self-Efficacy Scale, Miller's Writing Apprehension Test, Marsh's Academic Self-Description Questionnaire and a self-efficacy for self-regulated learning scale, in addition to an adaptation of the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey, items from the Student Attitude Questionnaire, and items assessing gender orientation beliefs. In contrast, Graham, Schwartz, and MacArthur (1993), after conducting interviews with fourth, fifth, seventh and eighth grade students, found no difference in regards to grade level for writing self-efficacy for thirty nine learning disabled students.

Kim and Lorschbach (2005) assert that self-efficacy patterns for younger students, or behaviour patterns relating to self-efficacy, are similar to those of older students. For example, students with low self-efficacy exhibited work avoidance behaviour, gave up easily when faced with difficulty, and were easily distracted. Students with high self-efficacy wanted to try, took risks, took more time with their writing, and were eager to participate in writing tasks. Kim and Lorschbach found that this behaviour is similar to how older students act. An age-related concern in writing self-efficacy studies is whether young children can identify their self-efficacy beliefs. Younger children have a tendency to overestimate their actual abilities, as do learning disabled students (Graham & Harris, 1989; Kim & Lorschbach, 2005; see Wilson & Trainin, 2007). However, Wilson and Trainin (2007) found that first graders do differentiate self-efficacy in terms of reading, writing and spelling. Kim and Lorschbach (2005) found that kindergarten and first grade students were able to describe their own writing self-efficacy beliefs. In Kim and

Lorschbach's study, teachers and students had similar perceptions of the students' self-efficacy beliefs. Additionally, students in first and second grade have relatively positive self-efficacy beliefs (Shook et al., 1989). All of the students surveyed rated themselves as being in the top or middle third of the class in terms of writing. Thus, these findings indicate that future research relating to writing self-efficacy beliefs is possible with younger children. While research on self-efficacy beliefs and writing is growing, more studies are needed. As most studies have been conducted with upper elementary and older students, a clear focus now should be on younger children (Pajares & Valiante, 1999; Shell et al., 1995). Relatively little work has been carried out with students in the grades of kindergarten through grade 3, while some work has been done with preschool and younger students (Cunningham, 2008; Wilson & Trainin, 2007). It is important to look at self-efficacy beliefs at the beginning of the educational process, not just the middle or end. Therefore, future research is needed regarding writing self-efficacy beliefs in those primary grades.

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