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Writing Self-Efficacy and Student Ownership: Exploring Middle School Writing Perceptions through Increased Ownership in the Classroom

Abstract

This action research study explored whether increased student ownership in writing influenced student self-efficacy in writing tasks. Previous literature shows that student engagement often decreases during middle school years when students desire to have more ownership over their learning. Forty-six students participated in this six-week study in a seventh grade writing and language arts class. For this study, students were surveyed regarding their self-efficacy towards writing tasks before and after a series of interventions related to student ownership. The results revealed a measurable decrease in writing self-efficacy within the intervention group of students.

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Exploring Middle School Writing Perceptions through Increased Ownership in the Classroom

by

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B.A. English Education, Dordt College, 2004

Action Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
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May 2019

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Exploring Middle School Writing Perceptions through Increased Ownership in the Classroom

by

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This educational degree has been a joyful and chaotic journey. In the midst of a maternal season of having and raising my three beautiful children, reflecting on my teaching and continued learning has been both an escape and a solace. The process has, undoubtedly, expanded my vision of students, classrooms, colleagues, and what it means to teach well. I'm so grateful for the many wonderful individuals and family and friends who have served as encouragers. Soli Deo Gloria! I thank my children for their graciousness towards "Mom's school work time." Most of all, I thank my husband, my best friend, for his continued encouragement, statistical-prowess, and loving support.

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Abstract

This action research study explored whether increased student ownership in writing influenced student self-efficacy in writing tasks. Previous literature shows that student engagement often decreases during middle school years when students desire to have more ownership over their learning. Forty-six students participated in this six-week study in a seventh grade writing and language arts class. For this study, students were surveyed regarding their self-efficacy towards writing tasks before and after a series of interventions related to student ownership. The results revealed a measurable decrease in writing self-efficacy within the intervention group of students.

Keywords: self-efficacy, middle school, student ownership

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Writing matters to our world. Writing helps us process what we think we know. “Writing fixes thought on paper,” (Moore, 2006, p. 15). Writing defines and preserves our human experiences, giving external form to our internal processing. Communication with others is a central component to being human. Our written words have become one of the primary ways we communicate our knowledge of the past and present as well as our hopes for our future (Moore, 2006). Writing includes both the reflective skills and the applicable educational skills necessary for students to navigate the world both inside and outside of the school walls.

Increasingly, writing matters to our students and their future. Shaw (2008) wrote, “Largely because of the renewed emphasis on writing instruction and assessment in the United States..., investigating students with clearly discrepant reading and writing performance would be valuable” (p. 1). Because of the additional component of writing performance on the two major college admissions assessments, The SAT Reasoning Test™ (SAT) and ACT, the gaps that exists within our schools and the proficiency of students’ writing skills becomes increasingly important for college admittance (Shaw, 2008). Students need to know how to articulate their understanding and knowledge through writing.

While an emphasis on testing writing is increasing in our nation, the current status of student writing appears dismal. For example, Moore (2006) cited the Commission for Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges in 2003 which calls writing “an essential skill” through which students must “struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate with someone else” (p. 19). However, the Commission released a study that revealed a bleak current state of writing in the nation: 4th graders wrote for less than three hours a week, but watch over 21 hours of television, “66% of high school seniors did not write more than one 3-page essay per month; and 75% of

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seniors did not receive a research writing assignment in social studies or history courses, and senior research papers have all but been eliminated” (Moore, 2006, p. 19). The lack of required writing within our schools does not align with the increased emphasis that is being placed on assessed writing.

A disconnect between measured writing assessment and students writing very little in school emphasizes the importance of further research. A variety of variables are at play, including why students aren't writing more in school, what students' attitudes are about writing, and how students' attitudes may affect teachers' decisions in assigning writing. More research is needed in the area of student writing, particularly when adolescent student interest declines.

Students' Perceptions

Middle school seemingly is the time when attitudes towards school often changes. Deci and Flaste (1995) found that many middle school students lose their drive for learning, lose motivation, and often find school boring, while Stevens (2003) documented middle school students' decline in literary skills, which is especially alarming because of the probable predictors for potential student drop-out from school (DeMent, 2008). Adolescent development includes a desire for greater independence. While students show greater need for involvement in decision-making and self-management, middle schools often emphasize teacher control and authority (Rubel, 2008). Thus, middle schools can frequently be characterized by a decline in student-teacher relationships as well as a decline in student engagement (Rolland, 2012; Rubel, 2008).

Additionally, middle school is a time of life where students undergo many changes in their perspectives towards themselves. Pajares, Johnson, and Usher (2007) reference further research which stated, “middle school seems to be the critical juncture at which academic motivation, in

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this case self-efficacy, decreases” (p. 115). While a middle school student’s view of her ability to complete a task (self-efficacy) may be on the decline, adolescence is also an exciting time of growth and discovery for students. DeMent (2008) cited the importance for teachers to develop “effective writing strategies that truly involve middle school students in their own learning” (p. 4). Therein lies great hope. DeMent (2008) reported a shift in how adolescent students change their perspective towards learning. Adolescent students connect how knowledge and skills relate to them and the importance of their future. For this reason, their maturity and learning process creates an opportune time “to build upon adolescents’ interests in themselves through writing activities that allow them to take a deeper look inside themselves” (DeMent, 2008).

Teacher’s Role

Teachers can assume an active role toward student writing perceptions. After Moore (2006) conducted narrative research following six middle school language arts teachers, his findings revealed the need for teachers to be explicit in the teaching of writing conventions and then to create an environment that empowers students to gradually increase their responsibility in their decision-making as authors. Students need to be given the opportunity to write from their personal experiences to feel empowered as writers (p. 169). If teachers can funnel the energy and individuality that students bring into the classroom, the climate and environment improves for both teacher and student. Blending the need for an increased emphasis on writing, the declining interest of middle school students, and the tenuous relationship between teacher and student, continued research will be helpful to shed some light on developing a more conducive space for writing in our middle school classrooms. Teachers may be able to assist students in improving their writing self-efficacy, while reducing writing anxiety through increased student ownership.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether student ownership of writing skills improves student efficacy.

Research Questions

This study explored the following three research questions related to student writing self-efficacy:

1. Does providing student ownership in writing measurably improve student writing self-efficacy?
2. Does the application of the key elements of student ownership result in higher self-efficacy?
3. What is the needed balance of teacher support and student ownership in order to result in high self-efficacy?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used. All definitions are the author's own unless otherwise noted.

Goal-setting - Student involvement within the planning and decision-making for her writing task.

Self-efficacy - The belief of a student's ability to perform a particular task in a particular situation in a learning environment, controlling her motivation and behavior (Klassen, 2010; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007).

Self-evaluation - A student's assessment of her writing process and progress, as articulated orally, in narrative, or as aligned with a teacher-provided rubric.

Self-regulation - The self-directive process by which students transfer their mental abilities into academic skills (Klassen, 2010, p. 19-20).

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Writing anxiety - A psychological onslaught of negative and intrusive thoughts making the writing process more difficult, or a physical paralysis experienced by a student writer, known as “writer’s block.”

Writing self-efficacy - A student’s belief in her ability to perform a writing task, by controlling her motivation and behavior in a learning environment.

Summary

In every school, teachers seek to create spaces and tasks that are best for student learning. This study examined if teaching strategies for greater student ownership in middle school writing tasks corresponds to higher student writing self-efficacy. This study examined if students’ view of their writing self-efficacy increased as a result of learning strategies aimed to increase student ownership.

Literature Review

A student’s belief about her ability to complete a learning task lies in her sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy beliefs provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment. Unless a person believes her action will produce a desirable outcome, she has little incentive to act or persevere in the face of obstacles (Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007, p. 105). Self-efficacy differs from both self-esteem and self-confidence because of the task component equated with self-efficacy rather than the emotional component associated with the latter terms (Kelleher, 2016). Self-efficacy is crucial in our school classrooms.

Students’ academic success depends in part upon their ability to exercise control of their behavior, emotions, and thoughts and manage their responses within a learning environment (Klassen, 2010; Pajares et al., 2007). This specifically connects with writing. As Huerta, Goodson, Beigi, and Chlup (2017) explained, a close relationship exists between student writing

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and self-efficacy. Research with participants of school-aged children and adolescents, and university students revealed a relationship between self-efficacy and writing anxiety. Results from a study with a sample of 127 university students in the United States revealed students who reported lower writing anxiety had higher self-efficacy than students who reported higher writing anxiety (Huerta et al., 2017; Pajares et al., 2007). Similarly, Klassen (2010) articulated the students' beliefs about self-efficacy as especially important during adolescence, often a period of declining academic motivation. The middle school years are when difficulties with the written language begin to emerge. Klassen (2010) reported that over half of some writing samples of middle school students revealed significant difficulties with writing. If students lack the belief that they can complete the task, the difficult task of learning to write is especially problematic.

Pajares et al. (2007) explained that the majority of previous research related to self-efficacy and students has been in areas other than writing. When research has been conducted relating to many of the four primary sources for student self-efficacy, specifically those which Bandura outlined as 1) mastery experience, 2) vicarious experiences of observing others perform tasks, 3) social persuasions received from others including verbal judgments that others provide, and 4) physiological and emotional states such as anxiety, stress, arousal, and mood states, repeatedly the results have been inconsistent. Over a dozen studies, ranging from 1991 through 2006, have been conducted in relation to the four primary sources of student efficacy and expected results on students and researched results have been inconsistent (Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim, & Zumbunn, 2013; Pajares et al., 2007; Usher & Pajares, 2008). Researchers Pajares et al. (2007) examined student writing associated with student's self-efficacy beliefs. Prior to this study, which also utilized the primary student self-efficacy sources as outlined by Bandura, little research had been conducted specifically addressing writing and self-efficacy research, which is

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“a noteworthy omission given the foundational status of writing in the curriculum, the acknowledged importance of writing skills to students’ academic success, and the strong relationship typically reported between writing self-efficacy beliefs and students’ writing performances and achievement” (p. 109). The research included specifically the area of writing as it relates to a student’s core self-efficacy beliefs.

Past studies have had varied results depending on what area of writing is being assessed and inconclusive results of whether self-efficacy relates more to students’ abilities than to changes in writing skills. Bandura’s social cognitive theory is rooted in the belief that “... individuals possess self-beliefs that enable them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions that ‘what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave’” according to Pajares et al. (2007, p. 105). The research as cited in Bruning et al. (2013) studied the relationship between college students’ writing self-efficacy and their actual performance. However, the results of their research accounted for an approximate 10%-15% variance in students’ actual writing scores because the measured items focused predominantly on writing mechanics (p. 26). Thus, this study didn’t assess writing self-efficacy, rather it measured mechanics in writing. Another study as cited in Bruning et al. (2013) measured a task subscale and a component subscale. The first related to writing activities students might perform (ie. writing a short story or argument essay), while the second subscale related to writing-related skills (ie. correctly using a part of speech). Similarly, this study measured writing activities and grammatical skills, but did not measure writing self-efficacy.

The difficulty of measuring student writing self-efficacy continues for decades. Research over the span of two decades as cited in Bruning et al. (2013) revealed the difficulty of framing writing self-efficacy in ways that will “yield information on writers’ judgments about

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successfully meeting writing's psychological, linguistic, and behavior challenges" (p. 27). In 1995, research as cited in Bruning et al. (2013) studied fourth, seventh, and 10th graders' writing self-efficacy, which revealed that "[w]riting skills self-efficacy was shown to predict writing performance at all grade levels but, unlike writing task self-efficacy, did not increase significantly with grade level, suggesting that writing self-efficacy gains are more related to students' abilities to successfully perform various writing tasks than to changes in specific writing skills" (p. 26). Based on these findings, researcher Pajares as cited in Bruning et al. (2013) created a primary measure of writing self-efficacy - Writing Self-Efficacy Scale (WSES) - which requires that students "provide judgments of their confidence in their ability to successfully perform grammar, usage, composition, and mechanical writing skills, such as correctly punctuation a one page passage or organizing sentences into a paragraph to clearly express a theme" (p. 26).

The writing endeavor is especially difficult to assess. Bruning et al. (2013) stated, "Self-efficacy is a domain-specific construct, which means that there can be no all-purpose measure of self-efficacy" (p. 27). Nevertheless, these researchers sought to articulate important and specific claims necessary to understand the complexity of a writing self-efficacy framework: 1) Writing is a complex cognitive act of generating high demands on working memory. 2) Writing development advances slowly. 3) Writers form strong impressions of their own writing experiences. 4) Writers group their writing-related experience into psychologically meaningful categories, revealing that over the passage of time and experiences of writing, a writer will attribute a perspective of themselves as writers associated with their judgments of their writing (Bruning et al., 2013, p. 27-28). While the former two claims stem from the results of multiple studies, the latter two conjectural claims of Bruning et al. (2013) hold a greater appeal to the

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focus of this action research. In addition, Shaw (2008) cited that as of 2003, a very limited amount of research exists to inform teachers of effective interventions to assist middle and secondary readers and writers, particularly concerning the notable diversity existing in adolescents. Thus, the difficulty of undertaking a research project in attempting to measure a difficult to measure element (self-efficacy) within a difficult area of study to articulate the struggle of the student skill (writing ideations, conventions, or self-regulation) was not to be minimized. Amidst the difficulty of assessing the many elements of writing, students' internal motivations also posed numerous research difficulties.

In order to understand young writers and their development, we must understand their internal motivational factors. Klassen (2001) proposed that teachers can enhance motivation through the following four conditions:

a) nurture functional beliefs about writing, b) foster student engagement through authentic writing goals and contexts, c) provide a supportive context for writing, and d) create a positive emotional environment for writing. It is in this last sphere that many students experience difficulties. Anxiety for writing tasks is common, and the psychological reactions of stress to writing interferes with confidence in completing tasks. (p. 8)

Prior research has helped attune researchers to writing's motivational and self-regulatory dimensions (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Multiple research studies indicate that students can effectively and efficiently improve their writing performance through effective instructional methods that incorporate modeled strategy use, goal setting, constructive feedback, and self-evaluation of progress (DeMent, 2008; Moore, 2006; Pajares et al., 2007; Shaw, 2008).

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Goal-setting

Goal-setting was an important component when considering student ownership in writing. When students had the ability to complete a task, their writing self-efficacy increased because of their confidence in their ability to achieve the task (Shaw, 2008). Rubel (2008) stated, “The more capable that students judge themselves to be, the more challenging the goals they seek to undertake” (p. 8). One of the key components of a student’s self-efficacy in writing was confidence in her ability to persist in completing a writing task even when confronting difficulties and distractions. Setting higher goals within a domain-related task like writing was one of the positive outcomes of students with higher self-efficacy (Bruning et al., 2013, p. 25).

Calkins as cited in Pajares et al. (2007) articulated that teachers of writing must be far less concerned about the question “Did my students *work*?”, but far more alert to whether students planned and made decisions about their writing. Students’ goal setting in writing is essential. Pajares et al. (2007) stated a teacher’s need to monitor their student’s subjective and objective experiences. Further, Calkins advocated that by helping adolescent writers find and pursue their own projects and goals, teachers created an environment where students became “productive and committed rather than disillusioned and embittered” (Pajares et al., 2007, p. 115-116). Goal-setting encourages productivity and confidence for students and their writing.

Self-regulation

Kelleher (2016) wrote, “The educational landscape is ripe with opportunities to bolster one’s self-efficacy through mastery over challenging circumstances” (p. 71). A student’s ability to evaluate where they are and find ways to continue to work when she encounters a difficulty also related closely to the process of student self-regulation (Holmes, 2016). Building upon previous studies, Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons as cited in Bruning et al, (2013) framing of

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writing self-efficacy for self-regulation as writers plan, write, and reflect on their writing seemed to rest most clearly on a theory-based account of the writing processes. Zimmerman et al. (1992) emphasized measures of writing self-efficacy closely tied to their experimental work in which teacher modeling and directing attention to writing process goals were utilized to improve writing skills and writing self-efficacy. In short, when students had successful experiences, they believed they will have further successful experiences if given a similar task and setting. Furthermore, Bruning et al. (2013) utilized the research knowledge indicating self-regulated learners make greater use of learning strategies and achieve better than learners who make little use of self-directed strategies to identify multiple activities tied to self-regulatory competence in writing connected to a student's writing self-efficacy (p. 27).

Researchers examined the role of motivation in self-regulated learning strategies. Rubel (2008) observed students using prior experience, goal setting, and processing of information to develop clues about their learning and used these clues to assess future learning goals. When student motivation was positively enhanced, students, specifically seventh- and eighth-grade students, “develop their academic skills and maintain their self-efficacy” (Rubel, 2008, p. 8). Within research conducted with middle school students of mathematics, Usher (2009) cited that high self-efficacy students reported positive experiences of self-regulation. For example, when Hannah, a high-achieving math student, encountered an especially difficult math concept, she would face the obstacle directly by finding similar problems to work through. Her self-regulation was a means of “equilibrating her confidence, reducing her anxiety, and ensuring her own mastery of the material” (p. 305). If, as these study showed, students with high self-regulation are also students with a high self-efficacy, conceivably, students who are given more ownership of their learning also have greater opportunities for self-regulation.

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Self-evaluation of Progress

Students feel empowered by participating in evaluating their progress. Andrade, Wang, Du, and Akawi (2009) reported that a student's self-efficacy rises when she knows the specific performance standards required and can progress toward an explicit goal. Andrade et al. (2009) research suggested that self-assessment promoted feelings of self-efficacy (p. 288). Their research found undergraduates reported increased confidence and motivation about their work in a qualitative study using criteria-referenced self-assessment (Andrade et al., 2009).

Self-evaluation required students to reflect on their process of learning and what they are learning. Not only did this process allow students to discover their strengths and weaknesses, but also it created an environment in which students learn what is required for improvement. DeMent (2008) explained that as middle school students become increasingly interested in how knowledge and skills relate to their futures, self-evaluations provide an important connection between teacher and students to discuss their understanding of their learning. DeMent (2008) proposed an emphasis on the middle school student "self" in self-evaluations. The middle school student's curiosity, interest, and imagination are piqued as they choose topics and areas of study that interest and connect to what they wanted to learn and for them to learn what it means to continue learning (growth mindset) (Moore, 2006). Self-evaluations provided a space for teachers to cultivate within students a deep cognitive learning, higher order thinking skills, and metacognition (DeMent, 2008).

The teacher's role in guiding students in methods of self-evaluation was crucial in this process. Pajares et al. (2007) explained how teachers played a vital role in helping students interpret their performance in adaptive ways through frequent and high level interaction with students as the students sought to understand how their writing achieves the evaluations as

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outlined in their rubric. Pajares et al. (2007) cited previous research they had conducted in 2003 which noted that in a classroom where students regularly self-evaluated through creating portfolios to share with peers, parents, and teachers, students learned to determine high-quality for their writing and to look more closely at their own writing level and self-correct. Frequent self-assessment led to more successful writing. Pajares et al. (2007) reported, "...as students learn to evaluate themselves as writers, they also learn to set goals and strategies for improving... and to document their growth. This self-awareness helps students interpret their achievements in ways that will boost their confidence" (p. 116). Self-evaluation had significant positive effects towards student self-efficacy within writing.

On the contrary, when students are concerned about their letter grades, their self-efficacy can be negatively affected. Bruning et al. (2013) stated that numerous studies have shown how writing-related outcomes (e.g. writing grades) affect writing self-efficacy. Usher (2009) reported, "Most have pointed to a mismatch between adolescents' changing developmental needs and the school environment as a likely cause" (p. 278) Ownership and responsibility given to middle school students to intentionally and insightfully reflect on their learning through self-evaluation may increase their self-efficacy.

One area of measurement of higher self-efficacy can be through the decrease of student anxiety when asked to complete a writing task (Look, 2008; Minahan, 2018; Minahan & Schultz, 2014). The prevalence of anxiety in our students heavily impacts our schools. Minahan and Schultz (2014) reported, a shocking 31.9% of children and adolescents in the U.S. have had an anxiety disorder during their school years in 2010. Look (2008) reported the benefits of expressive writing as a method for students to improve working memory and reduce intrusive and avoidant thoughts about negative experiences. These improvements may, in turn, free up

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cognitive resources for other mental activities, including our ability to cope more effectively with stress. Minahan and Schultz (2014) explained that anxiety can paralyze students' writing abilities to plan and execute a writing assignment, but teachers can help students move through their anxiety paralysis through problem-solving techniques, chunking assignments into smaller tasks, taking emotional inventory, and increasing a student's self-efficacy through an "I believe I can do it" attitude. Middle school students have anxiety, but it can be unclear how this translates to middle school student writing self-efficacy.

According to researchers Bresó, Schaufeli, and Salanova (2011), student anxiety affected student self-efficacy in undergraduates. Their research stated that the most important sources of efficacy beliefs are mastery experiences and "psychological states" (p. 340). Their quasi-experimental study found a positive correlation between interventions and increased student self-efficacy, student engagement, and academic performance in student population groups of undergraduate students (p. 351-352). Utilizing psychological (anxiety-reducing) interventions as students neared the end of the semester, Bresó et al (2011) study reported, "When students experience negative thoughts and anxiety with regards to their capabilities, these negative affective reactions can themselves further lower perceptions of capability and activate a stress-generating mechanism that reinforces the probability of the inadequate performance they fear" (p. 340). The study concluded that the higher the levels of self-efficacy, the lower the levels of anxiety, stress, and fatigue. If college students find greater academic success through anxiety-reducing strategies, a similar outcome could occur within middle school students who have found an increase in anxiety connected with writing assignments.

The levels of anxiety a middle school student experienced seemingly influences their self-efficacy. Pajares et al. (2007) found that at the middle school level, "anxiety had a quadratic

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relationship with writing self-efficacy, such that low or high anxiety proved predictive of self-efficacy beliefs but modest anxiety did not” (p. 113). Holmes (2016) research reported how students’ writing self-efficacy was affected by their experiences and their psychological state, specifically with anxiety (p. 55). Similarly, Kelleher (2016) found that stress and anxiety can negatively affect self-efficacy (p. 71). Pajares et al. (2007) asserted, “students’ anxiety and stress about writing were related to a diminished sense of writing efficacy. To ensure that students approach writing with less anxiety and stress, it is wise for teachers to frame writing in terms of gains rather than shortfalls” (p. 116-117). Interestingly, Usher (2009) explained that students with high self-efficacy framed their times of encountering a difficult problem in their academic learning in ways that were motivating; while those with low self-efficacy experienced a level of distress that left them feeling disheartened or often paralyzed, revealing the “complexity of physiological and affective arousal as a source of self-efficacy and calls into question findings from quantitative research that have shown no relationship between arousal and self-efficacy” (p. 308). In many cases, students’ apprehension about their writing is a product of the type of feedback they receive in school. Research indicated that a little encouragement goes a long ways in the classroom and in the interactions between teacher and student for student self-efficacy to increase (DeMent, 2008; Pajares, 2006; Pajares et al., 2007; Shaw, 2008).

Teacher support and granting of greater student ownership has the potential to both help a student writer move past anxiety and improve a student’s self-efficacy. Rubel (2008) found an emphasis on teacher control and authority in middle schools while students “show greater need for involvement in decision-making and self-management” (p. 10). While middle school students desire autonomy and the opportunities to exercise this in the classroom setting, middle schools

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are often characterized by “less positive and personal teacher-student relationships” (Rubel, 2008, p. 10).

To help bridge this gap, teachers can provide students with feedback that emphasizes how far they have come rather than how far they have yet to travel. Pajares et al. (2007) explained that because “attention has limited capacity, a mind well focused on the writing task cannot easily shift that focus to its fears” (p. 116-117). On the other hand, when students were often reminded of their lack of skills or the distance they were from their ideal writing or performance, they lose heart and give up, or their apprehension created a type of paralysis commonly known as writer’s block.

A teacher can help students work their way through this anxiety by articulating the teacher’s own feelings as they approach writing tasks. When students are aware of their own feelings of anxiety, students are better equipped to handle those emotions by focusing on small, specific writing tasks, thus developing robust efficacy beliefs that lead to growth and perseverance (Pajares et al., 2007). Moore (2006) found that when language arts teachers take on the role of modelling what it looks like to be a risk-taker, students are encouraged to do the same (p. 160). Moore’s findings articulated teacher’s modeling of the important skills of the writer’s craft (all the decision-making processes: clarity, audience, word choice, style, correct conventions, etc.) as vital alongside the belief in students having valuable experiences to write and share within the confines of a safe environment.

In summary, research indicates a positive correlation between student ownership through goal-setting, self-regulation, and self-evaluation and higher self-efficacy within the student. Research also indicates that students with higher self-efficacy have decreased anxiety when given writing tasks. Teachers can aid student self-efficacy by creating environments where

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students can practice student ownership and practice methods to decrease anxiety. Thus, the research of creating an environment where students are given ownership over setting goals, self-regulating, and self-evaluating their progress could indicate positive improvements in student writing self-efficacy.

Methodology

Participants

This study examined whether student self-efficacy measurably improves as a result of greater student ownership in their writing tasks. The research participants included 46 students within three sections enrolled in the seventh grade at a small, independent school in the Midwest during 2018-2019 school year. All students involved in the study were 12 or 13 years old and in seventh grade. Two sections served as the intervention group with class sizes of 15 and 16 students and one section of 15 students served as the control group. The control group was randomly chosen by a colleague of the researcher. Backgrounds of participants were upper-middle class, with 89% of the students in the study Caucasian, 4% African American, 4% Asian, and 2% Latino. Participants included 27 male students and 19 female students.

Materials

The Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale (SEWS) was the dependent variable in this study. The SEWS has been previously utilized in a study of college students in 2010 and with middle school-aged students in Lincoln, NE in 2011-2012 by Bruning et al. (2013) to assess students' perception of their writing (See Appendix A). SEWS consists of 16 items corresponding to the three categories of writing-related experience: ideations (5 items), conventions (5 items), and self-regulation (6 items). In this study, the sum of the SEWS survey scores were compared per student number as a pre-unit and post-unit measure. The teacher-researcher gathered the sum per

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student self-efficacy scores of SEWS questions 1-16. The post-unit score subtracted from pre-unit score totaled the sum difference. The total sums were compiled and compared the control group to the intervention group. The teacher-researcher also compared the sum differences in student post-pre unit survey responses to SEWS questions #11-16, which specifically related to self-regulation. The post-unit score subtracted from the pre-unit score created the totaled sum difference. These sum differences were compiled and analyzed the data from the control group and the intervention group. Data was gathered and summarized to assess changes in writing self-efficacy occurring from the intervention group and from the control group.

Procedure

This study compared self-efficacy in writing between students who were given more ownership of their writing through teacher-modeled intervention strategies and students who did not receive explicit teacher-modeled intervention strategies. The independent variable is the intervention strategies that the two sections of students received, which provided strategies for goal-setting, self-evaluating, self-regulating, lowering writing anxiety, and teacher-modeled writing strengths and weaknesses.

Most of the interventions included asking students to reflect on their work and to monitor their behavior. For example, in multiple group and individual writing projects, students graded themselves on their contributions, evaluating strengths and weaknesses. The teacher-researcher addressed writing anxiety and ways to acknowledge and work through feelings of anxiety when given a writing task as outlined within Minahan's (2018) work. In these interventions, students individually grouped writing tasks according to whether they felt confident, mediocre, or a lack of confidence in completing a writing task (specifically related to the skills on the SEWS survey of ideation, convention, and self-regulation). After completing this inventory, students

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participated in a class discussion modeled and led by the teacher researcher about strategies to use when assigned mediocre and low self-efficacy writing tasks (Minahan, 2018, p. 88-9). The discussion also included ways that students could help one another in areas of writing strengths. Other interventions included students setting and documenting smaller goals before beginning their writing project, students regularly utilizing self-check systems, where they reflect on what they are doing as a student learner, and practicing anxiety-reducing strategies through their physical bodies including stretches, breathing, and using spaces in the classroom that work best for individual student's learning preferences.

The dependent variable included the SEWS survey (Bruning et al., 2013), administered before and after the writing unit. The confounding variables included the students' prior knowledge, the students' maturation and biological development occurring within middle school years, the teacher researcher's quality of instruction and intervention, and inclement weather.

Data Collection

The SEWS survey was administered during class time by a colleague without the researcher present. Similar to the method that Bruning et al. (2013) outlined, the teacher read general instructions for the completion of the survey, indicating that there are no correct or incorrect answers and that students should raise their hands if they had any questions about the wording of the statements. SEWS did not have a time limit, but after most students finished, the teacher can suggest that all students try to finish "in the next couple minutes." This was not necessary as the total time length for students to complete the survey was 3 minutes for pre- and 4 minutes for post-. The teacher-researcher gathered the data from the SEWS, modeled interventions and student ownership of goal-setting, self-regulating, and self-evaluating, as well as anxiety-reducing techniques for the allotted time frame. Post-interventions, the SEWS Survey was

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distributed as a post-test to students in both intervention and control groups within the same classroom environment. Variables were as limited as possible with results being compared to changes in all students from the pre-unit survey and post-unit survey with growth over a 6-week time frame.

Design

This quasi-experimental design included a collection of data via student surveys through a pre-unit and post-unit model. This Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale (SEWS) survey, as utilized by Bruning et al. (2013), “test[ed] the adequacy of a three-factor model” [ideation, convention, and self-regulation] narrowed from a broader study Writing Habits and Beliefs Survey (WHBS) completed by researchers (Kauffman et al., 2010; research as cited in Bruning et al., 2013, p. 29) and given to middle school students to yield information on students’ writing habits, motivations, and goals. Unlike previous research which assessed students’ perception of their skills, this study used the SEWS survey as both the pre- and post- unit surveys, measuring if those student perceptions changed. To analyze the data, this researcher used a t-test to compare pre- and post-unit surveys. The difference between the students’ pre- and post-unit scores was calculated and compared across intervention and control groups. The students’ sum numerical responses on the pre- and post- unit was gathered and the difference was calculated between their pre- and post-sums.

Results

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students’ self-efficacy improves as a result of greater student ownership in their writing tasks. The results from each student’s SEWS pre-survey numerical score were subtracted from post-survey numerical scores. The teacher-

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researcher gathered the sum per student self-efficacy scores of SEWS questions 1-16. The post-unit score subtracted from pre-unit score totaled the sum difference. The differences of the intervention group were totaled and the differences of the control group were totaled. Overall, compiling the numerical scores of all 16 questions, students given the interventions (the intervention group) had a mean decrease of 21.72, while the control group had a mean increase of 140, as indicated in Figure 1. The calculated t-test resulted in a p-value of .002, yielding very strong evidence of a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Namely, the average improvement in SEWS Survey score for students in the control group was significantly higher than the improvement in the intervention group.

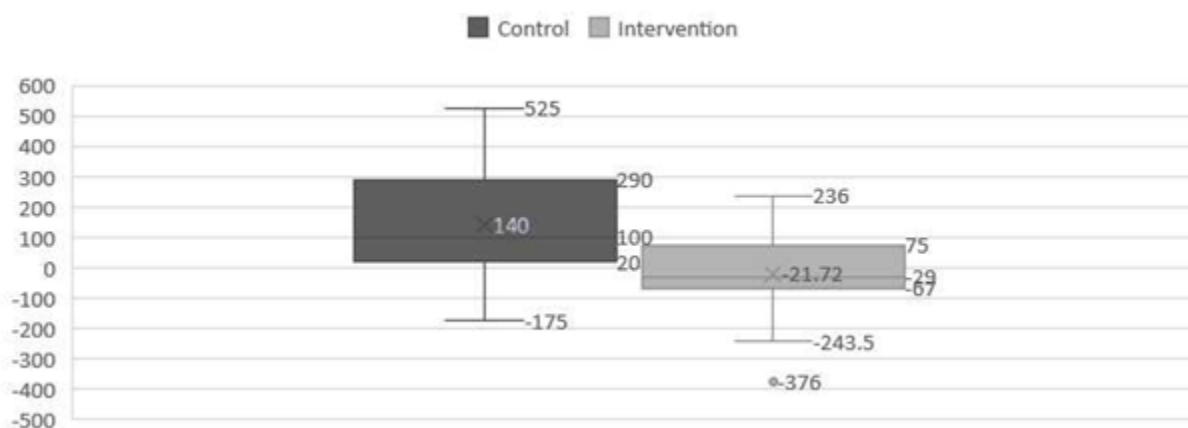


Figure 1: Box and Whiskers plot showing Differences in SEWS Survey (Post - Pre).

As shown in Figure 1, the control group results reveal a statistically significant increase in writing self-efficacy within students' SEWS surveys from post- and pre- results, while also revealing a larger spread of responses (with a high of 525 and low of -175) among the 15 middle school students in the control group. On the other hand, the intervention group of 31 students revealed a statistically significant measurable decrease in writing self-efficacy within students' SEWS surveys results, while revealing a smaller spread of responses (high of 236 and low of -243.5 plus one outlier).

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While all questions related to a student's writing self-efficacy, the SEWS included three categories of questions addressing different aspects of writing: Ideation (questions 1-5), Conventions (questions 6-10) and Self-regulation (questions 11-16). The teacher-researcher also compared the sum differences in student post-pre unit survey responses to SEWS questions #11-16, which specifically related to self-regulation. The post-unit score subtracted from the pre-unit score created the totaled sum difference. These sum differences were compiled and analyzed the data from the control group and the intervention group. Figure 2 (below) shows the differences in the SEWS survey post- and pre- results, focused on only the questions regarding self-regulation. Regarding the specific questions related to self-regulation from the SEWS survey (questions 11-16), the results showed the intervention group had a mean decrease of 7.84, while the control group had a mean increase of 86.13. The calculated t-test resulted in a p-value of .0003, yielding very strong evidence of a statistically significant difference between the two groups.

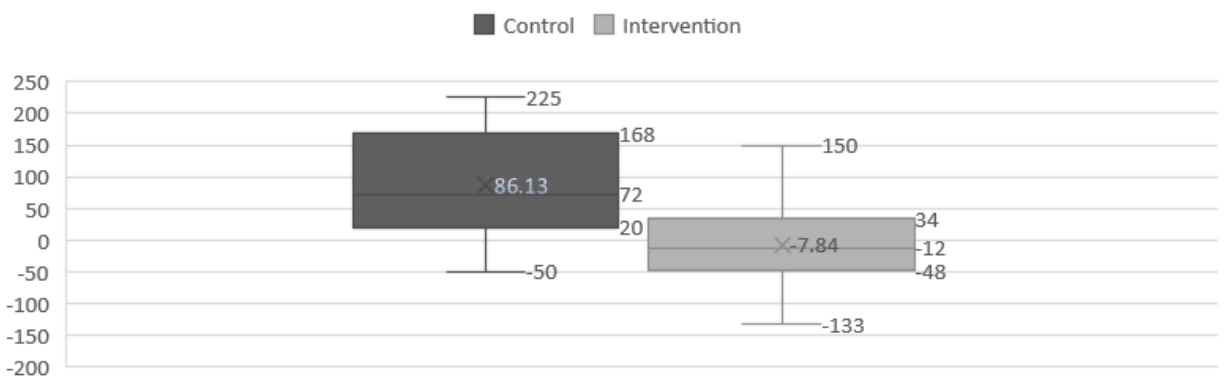


Figure 2. Box and Whisker plot showing Differences in SEWS Survey (Post - Pre) relating to Self-Regulation.

As shown in Figure 2, results show a statistically significant difference in self-efficacy as related to self-regulation between the control group and the intervention group. The intervention group responses related to self-regulation (questions 11-16) showed a mean decrease of 7.84, while the control group responses related to self-regulation showed a mean increase of 86.13.

Discussion

Overview of This Study

The guiding research question discussing if providing student ownership in writing measurably improves student writing self-efficacy revealed that while research indicates that middle school students desire more ownership over their writing tasks to prevent boredom and disengagement (DeMent, 2008; Klassen, 2001; Shaw, 2008; Usher & Pajares, 2008), the data results of this study show that the interventions the teacher-researcher utilized did not measurably improve students' writing self-efficacy. On the contrary, the data results showed that the interventions had a negative effect on the intervention group's student writing self-efficacy. However, the control group, receiving regular classroom instruction, had data results that showed a measurable increase in writing self-efficacy.

The second research question addressed if the application of key elements of student ownership result in higher self-efficacy. While the research (Bruning et al., 2013; DeMent, 2008; Kelleher, 2016; Pajares et al., 2007; Shaw, 2008; Usher, 2009) indicated that the key elements of goal-setting, self-regulation, and self-evaluation would increase self-efficacy, the data results of this study indicated that the key elements of student ownership did not result in higher self-efficacy as measured by the SEWS survey. Figure 2 specifically addresses self-regulation, one of the key elements of student ownership. Results revealed a statistically significant difference between the control group (increase of 86.13) and the intervention group (decrease of 7.84). The intervention group had a decrease in student self-efficacy as measured by the SEWS Survey.

The third research question addressed the balance of teacher support and student ownership in order to result in higher self-efficacy. While the research (Bresó et al, 2011; Look, 2008; Minahan, 2018; Pajares et al., 2007; Rubel, 2008) indicated that when the teacher provides more

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student ownership within tasks, models obstacles and addresses how to overcome feelings of anxiety, student writing self-efficacy may increase, the data results of this study indicate that the interventions utilized by the teacher researcher had a measurably negative effect on the intervention group's writing self-efficacy. However, the control group showed a measurable increase in writing self-efficacy from the pre-unit and post-unit SEWS survey as indicated above in both Figures 1 and 2.

Limitations of This Study

The teacher-researcher's quality of instruction and intervention was significantly hindered by inclement weather, creating nine days of interrupted or cancelled classes during this study which already included two scheduled days of professional development and one holiday. With a compact schedule for action research, the interruptions hindered meaningful rhythms within the classroom that impacted the time needed to model often and practice repeatedly the intervention strategies. As Bruning et al. (2013) stated, "writing is a complex cognitive act generating high demands on working memory" (p. 27). Writing requires focus. Focus was fleeting during this time frame for many seventh grade students. Assessing a writer's self-efficacy towards writing, an already complex field of research, with abbreviated class periods and frequent cancellations created a lack of student concentration and cohesive teacher instruction.

Considerations for Future Study

This study focused on student ownership increasing writing self-efficacy. The data results of this study did not validate the predominant research. However, the results of this study did validate the dozen studies ranging from 1991 through 2006 that assessed the primary sources of self-efficacy on students and researched results that have been inconsistent (Bruning et al., 2013; Pajares et al., 2007; Usher & Pajares, 2008). The control group's measurably significant increase

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and the intervention group's measurably significant decrease was unexpected. As a result of these findings, the teacher-researcher proposes further study be explored in this area of writing self-efficacy.

The teacher-researcher considers the possibility of students projecting an inflated efficacy towards their writing during their pre-unit. After the data collection, the teacher-researcher investigated specific scores that showed significant drops in the SEWS survey between pre- and post- unit. Upon observing data for the pre-unit SEWS, the teacher-researcher noticed high SEWS scores, specifically in students of high-ability writing skills. For example, intervention group student #100-14 assessed self at a score of 100 for 8 of the 16 questions on the pre-unit survey, and assessed self without any scores of 100 on the post-unit. Similarly, student #100-1 assessed self at a score of 100 for 5 of the 16 questions on the pre-unit survey, and assessed self without any scores of 100 on the post-unit. Furthermore, students #200-9, #200-10, #200-11 had 4, 3, and 2 pre-unit self-assessed scores of 100 on their surveys, while their post-surveys self-assessment had 0, 1, and 1 post-unit scores of 100 on their surveys, respectively. Students were not able to self-assess higher than a score of 100, so they may have reflected on room to grow as writers, rather than viewing themselves as completely confident in their writing self-efficacy.

One premise the teacher-researcher proposes is that the intervention group improved in introspection and self-reflection. The intervention group may have grown in the ability to self-critique. With the limited length of study and the range of interventions, students may have been exposed to a wider range of deficiencies in their writing as a result of conversations about areas of weaknesses and strengths in their writing. As a result of activities assessing student emotions towards writing tasks, discussions involving anxiety levels, physical body awareness towards our anxiety or learning struggles, and ways to assess our weaknesses and share our strengths, the

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teacher researcher proposes that the intervention group grew in their self-critique, finding awareness of his or her need to continue to grow in one's writing skills. The teacher-researcher shared struggles that she has as a writer, sharing her own work in her master's degree classes and the emotions that can accompany large tasks. This transparency may have influenced strong student writers (possibly similar to student #100-14) to realize that they, too, have skills that need continued development. Through the conversations of writing strengths and weaknesses, students may have internalized a need to continue to improve their writing.

Another possibility is students in the intervention group may have found themselves more overwhelmed by the multiple types of interventions and were not given time to practice and utilize these interventions because of the length of the unit. For example, the intervention group needed to set goals and reflect on their work time at the end of the period (goal-setting). The intervention group had modeled behaviors, rubrics, and reflections (self-evaluations). The intervention group had conversations about anxiety and how to work through negative emotions while writing and self-assessment of emotions (self-regulation). Ultimately, this may have led to students feeling more overwhelmed by the writing process. They had more instructions for interventions, but less time to practice using those strategies on future writing assignments. This, combined with the constraints of the length of study and inclement weather, may have led to the decline in SEWS scores of the intervention group.

Thus, the teacher-researcher proposes that more research over a twelve-week unit (or longer) be completed on the aspect of student ownership increasing writing self-efficacy. A longer period of time devoted to students practicing ownership of goal-setting, self-regulation, and self-evaluation would be beneficial to analyze. Ideally, the teacher-researcher proposes that the interventions be examined over an entire semester or year in order to provide multiple writing

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projects to practice the pieces of student ownership. In addition, a recommendation for future study would be to consider a more narrowed focus of interventions with repeated practice of specific skills related primarily on self-regulation rather than attempting to assess three areas of writing: ideations, conventions, and self-regulation. The act of writing and the writing self-efficacy of students require much thought and continued research to grasp the best ways for teachers to promote student's writing self-efficacy.

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Appendix A

Student # _____ (Please, do not write your name on this document)

Student Gender : Male or Female (circle one)

Student Age _____

Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale (SEWS) Student Survey

There are no correct or incorrect answers. Please raise your hand if you have any questions.

Read the following statements. For each statement, rate your belief in your ability to do the statement from 0 (no confidence) to 100 (complete confidence) in your writing at school.

1. I can think of many ideas for my writing. _____
2. I can put my ideas into writing. _____
3. I can think of many words to describe my ideas. _____
4. I can think of a lot of original ideas. _____
5. I know exactly where to place my ideas in my writing. _____
6. I can spell my words correctly. _____
7. I can write complete sentences. _____
8. I can punctuate my sentences correctly. _____
9. I can write grammatically correct sentences. _____
10. I can begin my paragraphs in the right spots. _____
11. I can focus on my writing for at least one hour. _____
12. I can avoid distractions while I write. _____
13. I can start writing assignments quickly. _____
14. I can control my frustration when I write. _____
15. I can think of my writing goals before I write. _____
16. I can keep writing even when it's difficult. _____