I Think I Can: Assessing Teacher Self-efficacy for Writing in
Early Childhood Settings

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Abstract

This study proposed here is designed to investigate the self-efficacy of preschool teachers for teaching writing. Students with high self-efficacy for writing are more interested in writing, put forth more effort, and persist at the task in the face of challenges. Teachers can be instrumental in helping to raise student self-efficacy beliefs. Professional development opportunities are one means of providing teachers with experiences that will allow them to improve student self-efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy for teaching their students will be measured using the Teacher Self-efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction, an instrument developed for this study.
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The relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement has been a topic of interest to researchers for over three decades. However, perceived self-efficacy is highly task specific (Bandura, 2006), influencing an individual’s choice of activities, the effort put forth toward that activity, and task performance (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). In academic settings, both teacher and student self-efficacy has been studied in a number of subject areas, in preschool to university settings. In the study proposed here, teacher self-efficacy for writing in inclusive early childhood settings will be investigated to 1) understand the current state of preschool teachers’ self-efficacy for teaching their students to write, and 2) for possible use in designing professional development opportunities to raise teachers’ perceived ability to teach writing to all students in their classrooms.

In order to determine the appropriateness of measuring teacher self-efficacy as a basis for planning professional development opportunities, a review of the literature on student self-efficacy, teacher self-efficacy, and the influence each has on the other will be presented. Further, important considerations in the development of self-efficacy measures will be described. Finally, a proposed research study investigating teachers’ self-efficacy for writing instruction before and after attending a professional development workshop will be presented.

Student Self-efficacy for Writing

Self-efficacy can be defined as an individual’s perception of his or her ability to satisfactorily complete a given task and is a part of the broader topic of motivation described by the social cognitive theory (Schunk, et al, 2008). In a review of the literature, Pajares (2003) looked at studies that investigated self-efficacy beliefs, other motivational constructs, and writing
in academic settings. He reports that there is consistent empirical evidence suggesting a relationship between writing self-efficacy beliefs and writing performance, impacted by factors of gender, ethnicity, and age. He cautions that “teachers would do well to take seriously their share of responsibility in nurturing the self-beliefs of their pupils, for it is clear that these self-beliefs can have beneficial or destructive influences” (p. 153), especially for young students.

Responding to Pajares’ (2003) contention that young students would not be able to describe their own self-efficacy for writing, Kim & Lorsbach (2005) undertook an investigation into the writing self-efficacy beliefs of kindergarten and first grade students. They used a qualitative approach to determine whether these beliefs could be described and whether the perceptions of both the researchers and teachers matched the students’ self-efficacy perceptions. They determined that the student beliefs generally echoed results found in studies with older children, such as those reported by Pajares. Additionally, teacher and researcher views of each student’s self-efficacy generally matched the students own perceptions of their self-efficacy beliefs for writing. A new finding was that students with high writing self-efficacy beliefs could be as unmotivated as those with low beliefs, if the writing task was seen as too easy or too narrowly defined by the teacher. Similarly, students in both of these groups could take a long time to complete an assigned writing task, because students with high self-efficacy for writing wanted to do well and had a lot to say, while those with lower self-efficacy had trouble deciding what to write. The authors suggest that teachers look at the motivations behind writing behaviors to meet individual needs.

In a related study, Corkett, Hatt, and Benvenides (2011) expanded Kim and Lorsbach’s (2005) approach by including measures of teacher self-efficacy and a more rigorous writing sample from the sixth grade students in their sample. Using a quantitative approach, Corkett and
colleagues found that teachers and students did not share perceptions of student self-efficacy (as Kim & Lorsbach had) but that teacher perceptions did relate to student reading and writing ability; no correlation was found between student perceptions of self-efficacy and ability. Like Pajares (2003) and Kim and Lorsbach (2005), the authors suggest that teachers have an important role to play in the development of strong self-efficacy beliefs by students. Corkett, et al. recommend classroom interventions to raise self-efficacy be put in place for students with low reading and writing achievement and that classroom teachers call attention to student successes.

The potential of a program designed to raise the writing self-efficacy of 60 fifth and sixth graders with learning disabilities was investigated in Spain (Garcia & de Caso, 2006). The students were randomly assigned to the experimental (n=40) or control (n=20) conditions. The experimental group received an intervention of ten 50 minute sessions to build self-efficacy for writing. The students participated in a series of hands-on activities that incorporated social learning strategies and produced posters related to each step of the writing process. After training, the students were found to spend more time on planning, composing, and revising, and had measureable, but moderate, increases in self-efficacy for writing. Based on pre- and post-measures in writing process and products and self-efficacy, the researchers concluded that the intervention was successful, showing moderate effect sizes. Garcia and de Caso suggest that the intervention, while beneficial, was not long enough to really impact self-efficacy in these students.

Having the ability to raise student self-efficacy for writing is important, because students who believe that they can accomplish the writing task ahead of them are more likely to put more effort into their writing, stay on task longer, and produce a better written product (Kim & Lorsbach, 2005; Pajares, 2003). Such findings were confirmed by Liew, McTigue, Barrois, and
Hughes (2008), who investigated the links between non-academic self-regulatory skills, academic self-efficacy, and literacy achievement in over 700 first- through third graders. Student self-efficacy beliefs were found to correlate to literacy and math achievement. Measuring self-efficacy in very young students can, however, be difficult. Wilson and Trainin (2007) developed the Early Literacy Motivation Survey to measure student self-efficacy, competence, and attribution beliefs related to reading, writing, and spelling. They used a series of scenarios and hands-on tasks before administering questions in each subscale, to which almost 200 first graders responded by choosing a happy or sad face to express their level of agreement. This approach was found to be both valid and reliable by the researchers, although the use of happy or sad faces has been specifically discouraged by Bandura (2006).

In sum, research on student self-efficacy for writing has found that self-efficacy is a measurable construct, even for young children (Kim & Lorsbach, 2005; Wilson & Trainin, 2007) and that self-efficacy ratings relate to achievement scores (Liew, et al., 2008; Pajares, 2003). Further, teachers are able to impact student self-efficacy (Garcia & de Caso, 2006).

**Teacher Self-efficacy for Writing**

What, then, of teacher self-efficacy? Does teacher self-efficacy for writing and teaching writing impact the writing achievement of students? Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, and Hoy (1998) reviewed literature related to teacher self-efficacy in light of teacher preparation and improving the self-efficacy of pre-service and in-service teachers. The researchers conclude that teacher self-efficacy plays a powerful role in student education. Tschannen-Moran, et al. differentiated between teachers’ personal self-efficacy and collective self-efficacy, which includes school structure and other outside influences, and between novice and experienced teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs. They suggest that once developed, self-efficacy beliefs can be
resistant to change; the beliefs of pre-service teachers (who may still be forming their beliefs) thus become an important source of research interest. Authentic teaching experiences were found to be effective in raising teachers’ efficacy for specific tasks. These findings were confirmed in a later study by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2008).

Using a random, stratified sample, Graham, Harris, Fink, and MacArthur (2001) utilized three measures, the Teacher Efficacy Scale for Writing, Teacher Orientation Scale, and the Teacher Writing Scale, to investigate how high- and low-efficacy teachers might differ in their writing instruction approaches. While not correlated to student outcomes, first through third grade teachers were found to be generally confident in their abilities to teach writing; high-efficacy teachers reported that their students spent more time writing than did low-efficacy teachers. The number and type of students in classrooms were found to be predictors of teacher self-efficacy but the findings on other variables (type of school, resources, school size) had limited impact. Teacher beliefs regarding writing were found to relate to teacher self-efficacy. Graham and colleagues call for causal research to determine whether measures to increase teacher self-efficacy for writing actually impact student achievement and self-efficacy.

Responding to the research calls of Tschannen-Moran, et al. (1998) and Graham, et al. (2001), Guo, Piasta, Justice, and Kaderavek (2010) looked specifically at the relationship of preschool teachers’ perceived self-efficacy for teaching literacy in relation to their educational level, years of experience, classroom climate, and the literacy gains of their students. Interestingly, they found that having an elementary teaching certificate did correlate positively with higher self-efficacy, while years of experience correlated negatively. Teacher self-efficacy was found to predict student gains in print awareness, but only impacted vocabulary gains in
high quality, emotionally supportive classrooms. This article makes a good case for considering teacher self-efficacy when planning professional development opportunities.

**Teacher Actions to Improve Student Self-efficacy**

How can teacher actions support student self-efficacy, particularly in writing? Teacher feedback seems to be an important factor (Wilson & Trainin, 2007). Dweck (2002) concurs, suggesting that some of the most “well-meaning” feedback practices can put students’ motivation and achievement in jeopardy. In order to increase students’ self-efficacy for any task, she asserts that teachers need to provide praise for meeting challenges, changing strategies, and working diligently on a problem. Such specific feedback can improve motivation and achievement.

After reviewing the literature on self-efficacy research and its impact in the classroom, Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) conclude that self-efficacy does play an important role in student engagement and learning. To this end, the authors suggest four ways that teachers can help raise student self-efficacy: help students maintain relatively high but accurate self-efficacy beliefs; provide students with challenging academic tasks that most can reach with effort; foster the belief that competence or ability is a changeable, controllable aspect of development; and promote students’ domain specific self-efficacy beliefs rather than global self-esteem. (p. 134-135). Similarly, Walker (2003) suggests that reading and writing self-efficacy can be raised by offering students choice, encouraging strategic thinking, offering students opportunities for self-evaluation, and changing the way reading and writing are assessed. She points out that when students persist at a challenging task and are successful, this raises their self-efficacy for that type of task; at the same time, a “second powerful source for developing self-efficacy is positive verbal responses of parents and teachers that convey to students their capability of performing
literacy tasks” (p. 175). Teachers who effectively use this type of feedback can, as suggested as well by Dweck (2002), effect positive changes in student self-efficacy.

Research, then, does confirm that teacher actions and feedback can be instrumental in raising student self-efficacy for specific tasks. However, Schunk et al. (2008) caution that it is the direct teaching of coping strategies that students can use when faced with difficult tasks and the possibility of failure that will, in the end, give students the confidence to believe that they can accomplish that task. It may be, then, that professional development designed to raise teacher self-efficacy beliefs for teaching young student writing and representation should include practice in giving appropriate feedback to children, as well as presenting specific strategies designed to help students overcome challenges as they learn to present their thoughts through writing and drawing.

**Measuring Self-efficacy**

Before using instruments to measure self-efficacy, it is important to understand that self-efficacy is not the same as “feeling good about yourself” (Schunk, et al., 2008, p. 143) or having a strong self-concept (Bandura, 2006). Bandura suggests that “Perceived efficacy should be measured against levels of task demands that represent gradations of challenges or impediments to successful performance” (p. 311), should measure the respondent’s confidence that an action can be accomplished rather than will be accomplished, and provides a range of responses from not at all confident to highly confident. Much of the research on self-efficacy provides correlation data between items on self-efficacy scales and participant demographics or teacher personal or collective self-efficacy. Most suggest that even when the instrument used in a particular study is found to be valid and reliable, further research is needed to assess its use in
other settings (Bandura, 2006; Tschannen, et al., 1998) or that it be used in conjunction with classroom observation (Graham, et al., 2001)

**Rationale and Purpose for this Study**

Based on the literature, it is clear that a high perceived self-efficacy results in greater interest, engagement, and effort put forth to accomplish the task at hand. There is a documented relationship between student self-efficacy beliefs and academic achievement (Pajares, 2003). Teachers have been shown to have the power to influence their students’ self-efficacy (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Walker, 2003). At the same time, researchers have shown that teacher self-efficacy can be raised through professional development and mastery experiences (Tschannen-Moran, et al, 1998). To be effective, however, teachers must combine purposeful feedback with direct strategy instruction that empowers students to accomplish challenging tasks (Schunk, et al., 2008).

While the literature is replete with studies on effective ways to instruct students with disabilities in the writing process, very few directly address the self-efficacy beliefs of those students or of the teachers who work with them. A notable exception is the work that has been done with students identified with learning disabilities (Garcia & de Caso, 2006) or identified as “at risk” (Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). This study addresses that gap in the literature by specifically addressing the needs of teachers who may encounter children with attention issues, hearing or vision impairments, fine motor weaknesses, and communication delays in their preschool classrooms. These teachers may need to instruct these students without the benefit of special education support; this may affect their perceived self-efficacy for meeting the writing instructional needs of all students in their classes.
The purpose of this proposed pilot study is to determine whether preschool teachers who attend professional development designed to raise teacher self-efficacy for teaching writing to all students in inclusive preschool settings experience a change in self-efficacy beliefs and teaching strategies as a result of that training. It may not be possible to effect significant change in self-efficacy beliefs after only a short professional development session, but information obtained here may help to validate the measures used and inform future research efforts (Henk, McKenna, & Conradi, 2011).

The research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

1. Do measurements of teacher self-efficacy for teaching writing indicate a change in perceived self-efficacy immediately following professional development?

2. Are there relationships between teacher experience and level of education and perceived self-efficacy for teaching all children to write?

3. How do selected participants in the professional development describe and demonstrate the influence of the training on their writing instruction in the early childhood classroom?

Methods

This study follows a mixed-methods research design that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions. Quantitative measures will be used to determine whether there is a significant change in teacher self-efficacy for writing instruction pre- and post-professional development and whether measures of teacher self-efficacy correlate with teacher experience and educational level. Qualitative participant interviews and classroom observations will be used to document specific strategies or instructional methods that teachers found effective in working with students.
Participants

**Setting.** Participants will be recruited from a non-profit organization that operates two preschools outside a major metropolitan area and partners with a local community college to offer low income students and child care employees up to 31 undergraduate credits in early childhood development or completion of the Child Development Associate (CDA) degree. The professional development opportunity will take place at one of the preschool sites. The non-profit organization is committed to excellence in preschool education and is interested in research that helps to define that excellence.

**Participants.** Letters will be sent to each of the teachers and teaching assistants in the two preschools and to students in the community college partnership courses soliciting their involvement in the study. It is expected that approximately 50 participants will be invited and that about 20 will agree to participate. The invited participants are expected to vary in age from 18-50 years and will have between one and 15 years experience as early childhood teachers. The participants employed by the organization will have bachelors or masters degrees in education or early childhood development, while the students and teaching assistants will have, or be working toward their CDA. Most, if not all, of the participants will be female.

Participants will be asked to allow the researchers to visit their classrooms three weeks after the professional development workshop; three volunteers will be chosen. It is hoped that these participants will represent each of the preschool sites, as well as a site where one of the college students is employed. Permissions from the directors of each of these sites will be obtained prior to any observations; procedures for the anonymity of any students observed, audio taped, or videotaped will be followed.

**Materials**
Teacher Self-efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction. This scale, developed specifically for this proposed study is adapted from Bandura’s (2006) Teacher Self-efficacy Scale. Teachers are asked to indicate how confident they are that they can accomplish a variety of tasks they may encounter during classroom instruction and in creating a positive classroom climate, using a scale of zero (cannot do at all) through ten (highly certain can do). The items are designed to relate to writing in preschool classrooms; this measure is adapted from self-efficacy scales presented by Bandura (2006) and Guo, et al. (2010). The items on which teachers will assess their confidence are presented below: (Note: writing in preschool classes will be defined as including words and/or representations.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Note</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Get through to the most difficult students</td>
<td>How did you adapt the scale?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Get students to learn to write when there is a lack of support from the home</td>
<td>Will teachers all interpret &quot;get through to&quot; in similar ways?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Keep students on task during writing assignments</td>
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<td>4. Motivate students who show low interest in writing</td>
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<td>5. Get students to work well together</td>
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<td>6. Teach students with communication delays to write</td>
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<td>7. Teach students with fine motor delays to write</td>
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<td>8. Teach students with hearing impairments to write</td>
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<td>9. Teach students with visual impairments to write</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Teach students with attention issues to write</td>
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<td>11. Make students enjoy writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Help students believe they can write well</td>
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The Teacher Self-efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction will be completed by participants before and after the professional development workshop. Background information needed on each
participant will be included at the top of the Scale (i.e., years of experience, level of education, current employment).

**Procedures**

Permission to conduct this study will be obtained from both the George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board, from the non-profit organization, principals at both schools, and the leadership of the community college partnership. All participants involved in the study will also sign consent agreements. All data sources will be kept strictly confidential. All assessment measures will be coded, with participant names available only to the primary researcher. In this way, comparisons and correlations can be made without individual identities becoming public. Participant’s names will be stored separately from coded documents.

**Professional development.** As part of this proposed study, a half-day professional development (PD) workshop will be offered to the participants. Two months prior to the workshop, participants will be asked to complete the Teacher Self-efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction. Using the self-efficacy beliefs to inform the content of the PD, the focus of the training will be specific strategies preschool teachers can use to increase student self-efficacy for writing in their classroom. Sessions will include: targeted feedback for building self-efficacy; understanding writing and representational development in the early years; and specific strategies for working with student who have developmental, communication, or fine motor delays, hearing or vision impairments, or attention issues. Sessions will be conducted by the primary researcher and preschool and special education teachers interested in the writing development of all young children. The workshop will be approximately three hours in length. Participants will be divided into three groups so that all will be able to attend each 45 minute session in a more personalized manner. As part of the evaluation of the workshop, participants
will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire rating the information presented in the workshop, what, if anything, they learned that they might use in their classrooms, and any questions they may still have. In addition, each participant will complete another copy Teacher Self-efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction.

Follow-up observations and interviews. On a voluntary basis, three participants will be asked to allow the researcher to observe in their classrooms. If possible, one teacher from each of the two non-profit preschool sites and one CDA or college credit student working in another preschool site will be chosen. The observations will take place during center time or another time during the day when children might be writing; this observation will be videotaped for further analysis. Additionally, these teachers will be asked to take part individually in a semi-structured interview to elicit qualitative data on whether the strategies presented at the PD have impacted writing instruction and any perceived changes to the teachers’ self-efficacy for writing with all students in their classes. The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed for future coding.

Some possible interview questions could include:

1. What was your most memorable learning from the professional development workshop?

2. Has your approach to writing with your students changed in any way as a result of the PD? If so, how has it changed? Your question would prompt just a "yes" or "no" response.

3. Has the way you give feedback to your students changed as a result of the PD? Do you want just a "yes" or "no" response?

4. Have you been able to use any of the specific strategies presented at the PD? Were they helpful? Were they well-received by the students?

5. What changes would you suggest to our next PD?

6. What questions or concerns do you still have?

Be sure you are asking open-ended questions that will increase the likelihood that interviewees will provide the information you are seeking.
Proposed Data Analysis and Expected Results

Quantitative data will be gathered using the Teacher Self-efficacy for Writing Instruction Scale, administered two months prior to and immediately following the professional development workshop. Qualitative data will be gathered using the end of workshop evaluation, classroom observations, and participant interviews.

Do measurements of teacher self-efficacy for teaching writing indicate a change in perceived self-efficacy immediately following professional development?

In order to determine whether measurements of teacher self-efficacy for teaching writing indicate a change in perceived self-efficacy immediately following professional development, the results of each participant’s pre- and post-workshop Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction will be compared to measure any significant changes, whether positive or negative. An overall picture of the participants’ levels of self-efficacy can be gained through descriptive statistics (Dimitrov, 2009). Questions that indicate a lower average self-efficacy rating can be addressed through the content of the professional development workshop. If these are addressed, it is hoped that a somewhat higher level of self-efficacy for that item will be indicated on the post-workshop assessment. It may be naïve to hope that any significant changes in teacher self-efficacy for writing instruction can be effected by one short workshop; however, this is a pilot study and the pre- and post-results may help to inform future research in this field. Another concern that must be addressed is that the Teacher Self-efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction is a self-report survey. Some respondents may provide the answers that they think the researchers want, or may inflate (or deflate) their post-workshop ratings in response to a positive (or negative) experience. Additionally, because this instrument is newly developed and is being

Note that you adapted the scale.

Has there been any literature to suggest that change in self-efficacy can be documented after a workshop?

Most PD literature suggests that change takes times and various ways of interacting with and applying the information.
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piloted in this proposed study, its validity and reliability statistics should be calculated to assess its appropriate use for future research (Bandura, 2006).

**Are there relationships between teacher experience and level of education and perceived self-efficacy for teaching all children to write?**

In order to answer this second research question, correlations will be sought between the participants’ years of experience in the preschool classroom and the pre- and post-workshop self-efficacy scales. Similarly, correlations between the participants’ highest educational level and their self-efficacy ratings will be calculated. Similar approaches were used by Guo, et al. (2010), Tschannen-Moran, et al. (1998), and Tschannen and Woolfolk Hoy (2007) in their studies of teacher self-efficacy. These researchers did find that teacher self-efficacy was impacted by both years of experience and educational background, and it is possible that their results will be replicated here. Conversely, because the sample population will be taken from preschools or students affiliated with the same non-profit organization, their backgrounds and experiences may be similar enough to negate some of the relationships found by previous researchers. It is reasonable to assume, however, that participants with a higher level of education in the field of early childhood will have higher self-efficacy beliefs for helping their students succeed as writers.

**How do selected participants in the professional development describe and demonstrate the influence of the training on their writing instruction in the early childhood classroom?**

The qualitative data collected to answer this question will come from three distinct sources: the workshop evaluation questionnaire; classroom observations; and participant interviews. The classroom observations will be videotaped; the participant interviews will be audio taped. Both, along with the evaluation results, will be transcribed. The data from these
sources will be coded following the procedures associated with grounded theory research, using constant comparative methods (Cresswell, 2013). Here, the qualitative data will be used to go beyond the self-reported data from the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction and to draw a picture of how the PD workshop information has (or has not) been put to use in selected classrooms. This information will be invaluable as the study is expanded and replicated.

**Limitations and Educational Implications**

The research proposed here is a pilot study, designed to be implemented with a small sample population of preschool teachers and students connected with a single non-profit concern. It is not clear whether the shared experiences of these teachers and students will impact the results of this study. It may be that these teachers have the experience and supports they need to meet the writing instruction needs of their students, and feel quite capable of meeting those needs. On the other hand, they may not feel that writing instruction is appropriate in the preschool setting and may not feel that the self-efficacy questions or workshop content are appropriate.

The instrument used for measuring teacher self-efficacy, the Teacher Self-efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction, has been developed specifically for this study, based on similar measures used in published research (Graham, et al., 2001; Guo, et al., 2010). Hopefully, it will be found to be both valid and reliable for use in future research. At the same time, it is a self-report measure, subject to the whims of the respondent. Classroom observation and participant interview data are included in the study help to mitigate the subjective aspects of self-reporting and the fact that the post-workshop scale is to be completed at the close of the PD workshop.

This proposed study is designed to provide preschool classroom teachers with the tools they need to help all students build self-efficacy for writing in their classrooms. At the same time, the information presented to the participants is designed to increase their own self-efficacy.
for writing instruction, and, perhaps in other areas of preschool instruction, as well. If successful, this study can be extended to other early childhood settings, helping all students see themselves as writers, and all teachers as writing instructors.

**Conclusion**

Self-efficacy is the belief that an individual can accomplish the task at hand. Students with high self-efficacy for writing are more interested in writing, put forth more effort, and persist at the task in the face of challenges. Teachers can be instrumental in helping to raise student self-efficacy beliefs. Professional development opportunities are one means of providing teachers with experiences that will allow them to improve student self-efficacy. The pilot study proposed here will include specific activities and information to help preschool teachers build their own self-efficacy for teaching all students in their classrooms to write. Changes in the teacher’s own beliefs will be measured by the Teacher Self-efficacy Scale for Writing Instruction, a measure created for this pilot study. The results of this proposed research will inform future research on writing self-efficacy beliefs in early childhood settings.
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References


