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# Writing Instruction in U.S. Classrooms

## Diverging Perspectives for Teachers Across Content Areas

**W**riting is a fundamental skill that is essential for student learning, academic success, and career opportunities. Writing also has been found to be a key process that supports the development of numerous academic skills, such as reading comprehension, and writing practices have been linked to improvements in content area knowledge across a variety of subject areas, such as math, science, and social studies.<sup>1</sup> Despite the importance of writing skills, writing often has been considered the most neglected of the three “Rs” in teacher preparation and classroom instruction.<sup>2</sup> According to numerous studies, elementary and secondary teachers typically devote less than one hour per day to teaching writing,<sup>3</sup> with students in secondary schools expected to write a paragraph or more for only 20 percent of class assignments.<sup>4</sup> This lack of focus on writing instruction is reflected in standardized assessment results: Only one-quarter of students in the 8th and 12th grades score proficient or above on the most recent writing test administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.<sup>5</sup>

Writing instruction has been found to be particularly limited in classes other than English language arts (ELA), although evidence exists that non-ELA teachers emphasize writing skills to some degree. A national study of course assignments found that students write more for their ELA classes than for any other single subject, but when all other subjects are combined, they write more for these courses than they do for their English classes. However, much of the writing for non-ELA courses involved writing without composing, such as writing short answers, filling in blanks, or rotely copying course readings.<sup>6</sup>

The variation in quantity and quality of writing instruction across content areas might be related to disparities in teachers’ preservice training. Nationwide, preservice training that focuses on writing instruction has been found lacking for all disciplines; in a national survey, most high school teachers indicated that their college/university teacher education programs did not prepare them to teach writing at all.<sup>7</sup> In a national survey, a majority of secondary teachers reported not receiving adequate preservice preparation to use writing activities to support student learning. ELA teachers were more likely to report being prepared to teach writing-to-learn

<sup>1</sup> Herbert, Gillespie, and Graham, 2013; Miller, Scott, and McTigue, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Kihara, Graham, and Hawken, 2009; Troia and Graham, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Coker et al., 2016; Drew et al., 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Applebee and Langer, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Gillespie et al., 2014; Ray et al., 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Kihara, Graham, and Hawken, 2009.

**We asked a sample of teachers in secondary schools ( $n = 3,744$ ) to rate their level of agreement with the following statements:**

- I believe strong writing skills are essential to help my students succeed in college and career.
- I know what good writing instruction looks like.
- I have received effective training and support for implementing writing instruction in my classroom.
- I feel equipped to deliver good writing instruction to my students.
- I know how to assess whether my students' writing is improving.
- I have access to high-quality instructional materials to teach writing.

**Options for responses were *strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.***

activities than social studies, science, and math teachers.<sup>8</sup>

New results from the RAND Corporation's American Educator Panels (AEP) expand on these findings. The survey questioned teachers in secondary schools about their preparation and comfort in teaching writing in their classrooms.<sup>9</sup> The survey results fill an important gap in understanding a large sample of teachers' sense of preparation and efficacy in teaching writing across the disciplines.

We expand on these findings with new results from a nationally representative survey of secondary teachers from the RAND Corporation's AEP.

<sup>8</sup> Gillespie et al., 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Teachers were included in the survey if their schools served any grades from 6 through 12. See Johnston et al. (2020) for more information.

## **Virtually All Teachers Thought That Writing Skills Are Essential to Success in College and Career**

Nearly all teachers agreed with the statement that strong writing skills are essential for success in college and career, with 80 percent strongly agreeing and another 17 percent somewhat agreeing. When respondents who teach ELA subjects (i.e., English, language arts, reading, literature, writing, speech) were compared with non-ELA teachers, there was a slight disparity in the number of teachers indicating that they strongly agree with the statement: 80 percent of ELA teachers indicated "strongly agree," while 76 percent of non-ELA teachers did the same. When the "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" options were combined, there was minimal difference in perspective: Approximately 98 percent of ELA teachers and 96 percent of non-ELA teachers somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement.<sup>10</sup>

## **ELA Teachers Are Best Equipped to Teach Writing**

Figure 1 presents a comparison of the perspectives of ELA and non-ELA teachers regarding five statements about writing instruction. Across all these statements, ELA teachers were more likely to report being prepared to teach writing and to support student growth in this area. For example, 77 percent of ELA teachers agreed that they received effective training and support for writing instruction, compared with slightly more than half of non-ELA teachers. Ninety-one percent of ELA teachers reported feeling equipped to deliver good writing instruction to their students, compared with only 67 percent of non-ELA teachers. Almost all ELA teachers reported knowing how to assess writing improvement, compared with about three-quarters of non-ELA teachers. Results

<sup>10</sup> Differences among teachers in the non-ELA group also were considered (e.g., science teachers versus math teachers), but there was no consistent or notable pattern of differences. Therefore, the focus remained on the difference between the two groups of teachers described in the body of the report.

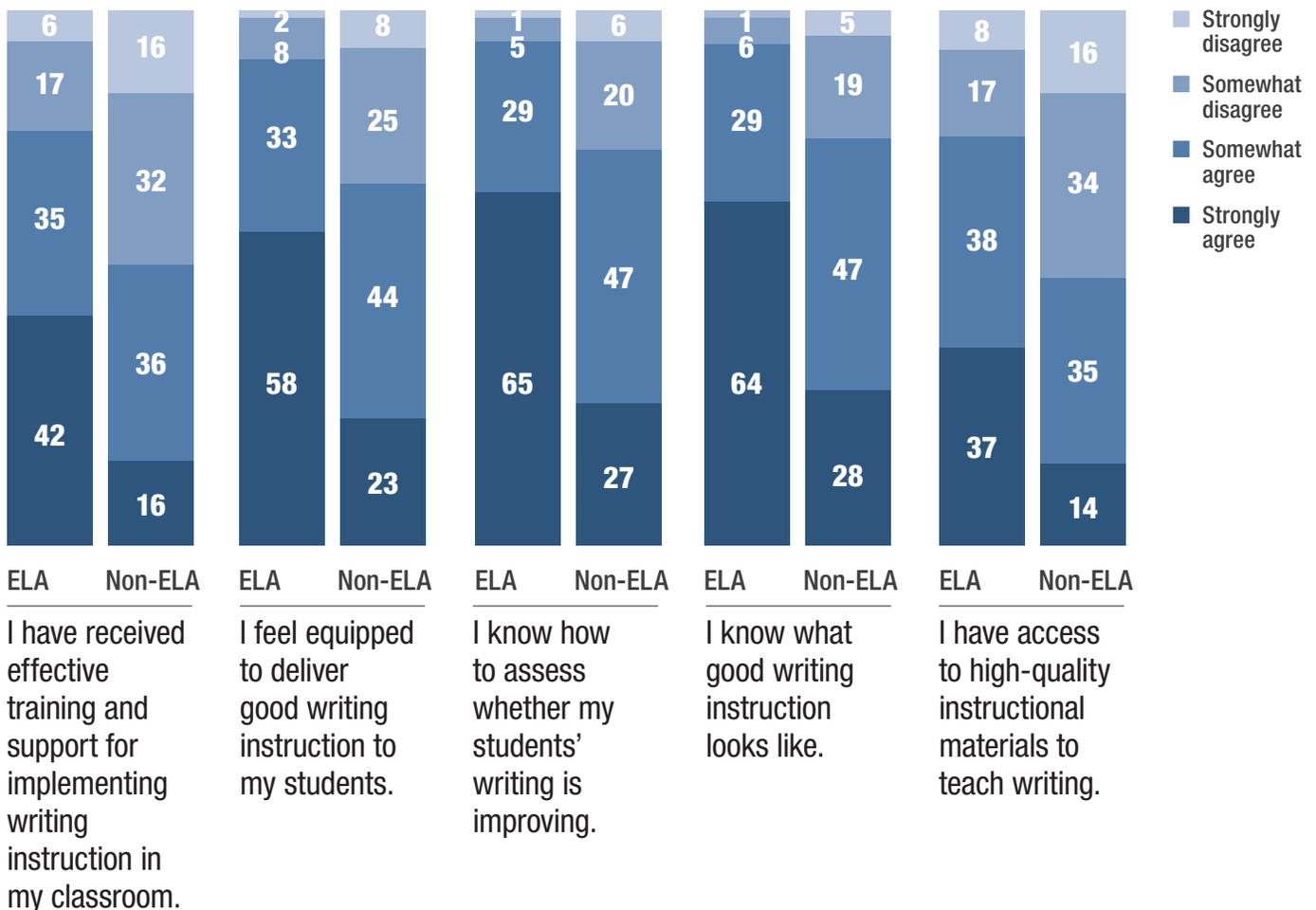
were similar for writing instruction, with 93 percent of ELA teachers somewhat or strongly agreeing that they knew what good writing instruction looks like and 75 percent of non-ELA teachers doing so (64 percent of ELA teachers strongly agreed, while only 28 percent of non-ELA teachers did so). Finally,

teachers were asked if they agreed that they had access to high-quality instructional materials to teach writing; three-quarters of ELA teachers somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, while only 49 percent of non-ELA teachers expressed some level of agreement.

FIGURE 1

## ELA Teachers Feel More Confidence About Teaching Writing

Percentage of Secondary Teachers' Agreement with Statements About Writing Instruction, by Subject Area Taught



NOTE: All differences between ELA and non-ELA teachers were statistically significant based on a weighted linear regression model with the survey response as the outcome and teachers' subject taught as the predictor ( $p < 0.001$ ). Figure results do not always sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

## Discussion

Although virtually all teachers believe that writing is important for students' academic and career success, there is a consistent pattern of differences in teachers' assessment of their preparedness to teach this important skill. Across several questions about writing instruction, ELA secondary teachers felt more prepared to teach writing than colleagues who teach other subjects. This difference is not entirely surprising, because writing instruction traditionally has been a core element of ELA courses, and a large body of research suggests that teacher preparation programs are particularly poor at training teachers entering non-ELA content areas.

The consistent differences between ELA and non-ELA teachers may be somewhat expected, because writing instruction traditionally has been a core element of ELA courses in the United States. However, writing enhances students' performance in other school subjects. Robust writing activities—which go beyond writing down short answers or filling in blanks on a worksheet—have been found to help students retain and critically interpret content presented in science, social studies, and mathematics.<sup>11</sup> More specifically, writing tasks that involve metacognition or reflection have been found to improve student learning across a variety of subject areas.<sup>12</sup> Teacher preservice programs should provide training to integrate writing instruction into all subject areas; beyond preservice programs, the findings from this study suggest that schools, districts, and state education agencies need to recognize that opportunities to learn how to best use writing to support learning are uneven, and that efforts need to be made to provide all educators with opportunities to improve their writing instruction.

<sup>11</sup> Graham and Hebert, 2011; Graham and Perin, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, and Wilkinson, 2004.

These findings have several important limitations. First, the survey does not include the perspectives of elementary teachers. Second, we are not able to directly align our results with much of the literature base on teacher perceptions of writing instruction, because we do not delve into specific writing activities that have been explored in prior studies of secondary teachers.<sup>13</sup> Relatedly, we cannot formally assess teachers' self-efficacy to teach writing through previously validated scales.<sup>14</sup> Third, this survey measures teachers' self-reported perceptions of their writing instruction and does not provide an objective assessment of the quantity or quality of the writing activities being implemented in their classrooms. Finally, the survey data do not allow further exploration into the causes of the discrepancies between ELA and non-ELA teachers.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study suggest that district, state, and school leaders should focus on improving all teachers' effectiveness as teachers of writing. Specifically, policymakers might benefit from learning more from teachers about specific strengths and weaknesses related to writing instruction activities, and policymakers should encourage greater access to preservice and inservice training materials, as well as to high-quality instructional materials related to writing. In the meantime, school leaders should encourage collaboration between ELA teachers and teachers of different subject areas so that ELA teachers can support their colleagues' use of writing strategies in their lesson plans and assessments and to encourage the creation of interdisciplinary activities and projects that include strong writing components.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, Scott, and McTigue, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Locke and Johnston, 2016.

## How This Analysis Was Conducted

To compare teachers' responses across a variety of content areas, a dichotomous indicator of whether a teacher was an ELA teacher was used, based on whether a teacher indicated that they taught such courses as "English, language arts, reading, literature, writing, speech, etc." Teachers who did not select this option were defined as non-ELA teachers. Approximately 28 percent of our respondents were classified as ELA teachers.

The analysis of teachers' reports of preparation and readiness to teach writing consisted of three steps. First, weighted frequency tabulations were estimated to determine the percentage of ELA and non-ELA teachers who indicated their level of agreement with each of the statements mentioned above. Second, weighted linear regression models were estimated, in which the outcome measures were the survey questions and the sole predictor variable was the dichotomous variable indicating whether the teacher was an ELA teacher. This weighted regression allowed assessment of the directionality and statistical significance of the association between the survey responses and the subject area taught. Third, we conducted supplemental analyses that included additional covariates, such as district size, school size, teacher experience, teacher race/ethnicity, and the demographics of their schools' students (including percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch and percentage of black and Latino students).

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## About the AEP Data Note Series

The AEP Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see the Learn Together Surveys Technical Documentation (RR-4332-BMGF, [www.rand.org/t/RR4332](http://www.rand.org/t/RR4332)) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email [aep@rand.org](mailto:aep@rand.org) or visit [www.rand.org/aep](http://www.rand.org/aep).

## About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. This report is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. We are grateful to the foundation staff for their collaboration and feedback on our surveys and analysis. The findings and conclusions we present are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. For more information, please visit [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org).

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