

What do First-Grade Teachers Think about the Nature of Writing?

Nidhi Kunwar

Abstract

Teachers are a significant agency in the education system. The way teachers think about a field impacts their pedagogical approaches and objectives. The present study aims to understand what first-grade teachers think about the nature of children's writing and of writing pedagogy.

Keywords: Writing, first-grade, teachers, children, handwriting, copying

Introduction

Writing is a vital literacy component. Literacy is primarily associated with schooling, so instruction is expected to make children skilled writers (Graham, 2019). In the Indian context, young children learn writing in schools. Grade one is often the entry grade for formal schooling. The experiences and environment children receive in first grade become their initial encounter with writing. First-grade teachers' assumptions about writing and their pedagogical practices can significantly influence young children's thoughts and perceptions about writing. Brindle et al. (2016) highlighted that the teachers' beliefs are an essential factor in pedagogy as the teachers' vision significantly impacts assumptions about learning and instructions in the classroom. Similarly, Rai (2015) also emphasized the impact of the teachers' assumptions on their pedagogy and approach towards writing. Hence, the influence of the teacher's vision on her pedagogy and her assumptions about children's assumptions cannot be underestimated.

The study uses qualitative methodology to understand first-grade

teachers' assumptions about the nature of writing. The paper is divided into four parts: methodology, findings, discussion, and educational implications.

Methodology

The study aimed to understand first-grade teachers' assumptions about teaching writing in grade one. Data were collected from seventeen first-grade teachers in twelve schools (including government and private institutions) over six months. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, informal conversations, and student's writing samples. The themes were derived from first-level coding and pattern coding (Miles et al., 2014). Data were reduced to clusters and later grouped into patterns and interpreted.

Findings

The present study focused on understanding first-grade teachers' assumptions about the nature of writing, especially in first grade. The following critical findings emerged through data analysis:

Nature of Writing

All the teachers were convinced that writing is a medium for expressing one's feelings, thoughts and emotions. Teachers primarily defined writing as a medium of communication. Some of the responses received are as follows:

Likhna abhivyakti hai. Likhney se hum apne nizi vichaar doosrey vyakti ko bata patey hai.

(Writing is expression. By writing, we can express our personal thoughts to another person).

Likhna matlab apne dil ki awaaz doosrey tak sanpreshit karna.

(Writing means communicating our heart's voice to another person).

Teachers' responses highlighted that all of them were aware of the basic nature of writing. They explained writing with terms such as voice, expression and communication.

Nature of Writing for Children

Describing writing for first-grade children, most teachers highlighted

the significance of factors such as copying and handwriting. They emphasized that first-grade children are immature and young. Hence, writing for children is primarily equated to accurately copying work from a blackboard in beautiful handwriting. A few examples from teachers' responses are quoted below:

Chotey bacchon ke liye toh likhna matlab sahi se kaam utarney ki practice hai.

(For young children, writing means practice of copying work accurately).

Likhna matlab saaf handwriting me akshar ki akriti utarna.

(Writing means tracing the shape of letters in clean handwriting).

The teachers' responses in this category highlighted that most of them perceived writing in a completely different way for children (Rai, 2015). While responding to the earlier question, they defined writing with terms such as expression, communication, and voice. However, in explaining writing with specific reference to first-grade children, teachers connected writing with copying and handwriting. Hence, the nature of writing became mechanical and prescriptive when the focus turned to young children.

Nature of Writing Pedagogy

Teachers were asked about how they teach writing to first-grade children. All teachers responded that they mostly proceed sequentially. In the initial month, they ask children to write Hindi varnamala (Hindi alphabet) in their notebooks. After that, they introduce children to two-letter, then three-letter and then four-letter words.

Dheerey dheerey bacchon ko likhna sikhatay hai. Pehle varnamala ki practise hoti hai. Phir do varn jaisey 'ghar', phir teen varna jaise 'mahal' aur char varna jaisey 'bargad' ke shabd padhatay hai.

(Slowly-slowly, we teach writing to children. First, the practice of letters is given. Then two letters like 'ghar' (house), then three letters like 'mahal' (palace) and four letters like 'bargad' (banyan) words are taught).

Chotey bacchey hai toh minimum se shuru kartay hai. Pehley to dots judwaney ki practice detay hai. Phir uchiit Akshar akriti bananey par jaatey hai. Phir shabd par jaatey hai.

(As children are young, we start from the minimum. First, we give practice of joining two dots. Then, we shift to teaching appropriate letter shapes. Then we move to words).

The responses highlighted that teachers mostly follow a bottom-up approach to teaching writing. Sequential progression from alphabet to a four-letter word is mostly followed as the preferential approach for pedagogy of writing. Further, teachers justified the selection of this approach on account of the young age of children. They emphasized that the bottom-up approach to teaching writing is appropriate since children are young.

Focus of Writing Pedagogy

Most teachers shared that they focus excessively on two components while teaching writing: beautiful handwriting and accurate copying. Teachers emphasized that these two factors are basics of writing; hence, their constant emphasis on them in first grade positively impacts young children's writing. As they explained:

Main handwriting par sabse jyada dhyaan dene ke liye encourage karti hoon. Mein bolti hoon ganda kaam mat do, saaf akshar banao, ek size ke, gol ghuma kar sundar akriti banao.

(I encourage children to give maximum focus on handwriting. I ask them not to give dirty or untidy work, make clean letters of one size by turning round to make beautiful shapes).

Mein focus karti hoon ki saarey bachey board se exact kaam utarey, sundar akshar likhey.

(I focus on making all children copy exact work from the blackboard and write beautiful letters).

A few teachers also shared that in addition to copying and handwriting, they additionally focus on subject-specific notebooks while teaching writing. They explained that the format of a specific notebook makes children understand the expected writing style.

Subject wali copy se likhney ki disha ki samajh viksit hoti hai.

(Subject-specific notebook develops understanding about the directionality of writing).

Hindi ki copy mein bacha line pakadta hai aur phir ek disha mein likhta hai.

(A child catches a line in a Hindi notebook and then writes in one direction).

The above examples highlight that first-grade teachers mainly focused on three main factors in writing: handwriting, copying, and subject-specific notebooks. Firstly, all teachers emphasized the significance of handwriting. They shared that they encourage children to focus on the beautiful formation of letters. Secondly, most teachers believe that copying is a necessary and helpful strategy for young children. Thirdly, the teachers justified the use of subject-specific format notebooks and even attributed the attainment of features of writing such as directionality and linearity to the correct format notebooks (Kunwar, 2022).

First-Grade Children as Writers

Responding to this question, most teachers shared that their first-grade students cannot be independent writers because they are young and immature. They emphasized that first-grade children's experiences and exposure are highly restricted. Hence, the idea of first-grade children writing on their own is not feasible. Further, many teachers justified their bottom-up approach in writing on account of the young and immature age of children. As they shared:

First-class ka bachaa khud soch nahin sakta.

(A first-grade child cannot think on his own)

Copying se hi first-grade ka bachaa likh sakta hai.

(A first-grade child can write only by copying).

Chotey bacchey anubhavheen hotey hai. Lekhan kala ki gehrai nahi jaan saktey.

(Young children are without experience. They cannot understand the depth of the art of writing).

Yeh bacchey first-class ke hain , isliye mujhey minimum se start karna hota hai.

(These children are from first grade. That's why I have to start from the minimum).

The above responses by the first-grade teachers highlight their emphasis on young age as a limitation. Their views emphasized that they mainly believed that young children are incapable of thinking and writing.

Children's Background

Most of the teachers acknowledged home background as a major factor behind children's ability to acquire literacy. They shared that many children in their class lack writing skills because their home background is deficient. They explained that background is a significant factor in education, and these children's home environment is defective as it offers minimal meaningful opportunities. To quote from them

Creative activities inn bacchon ke saath nahin karwa saktey kyunki inkey ghar mein kuch special nahi hota.

(Creative activities cannot be done with these children because at their home, nothing special ever happens).

Inn bacchon ke paas meaningful experiences hotey hi nahin hai.

(These children do not have meaningful experiences).

The above examples indicate that most of the teachers perceived the poor background of their first-grade students as a constraint. Their responses highlighted a mismatch between students' home experiences and school expectations. Many teachers described students' home experiences as worthless with specific reference to creative school activities. Hence, the teachers thought their first-grade students lacked the required, expected, and meaningful experiences because of their restricted background.

Discussion

The study's main objective was to understand teachers' assumptions about the nature of writing in first-grade. The findings of the study highlighted specific key points:

All the teachers were aware of the actual nature of writing. They emphasized the significance of voice and expression in writing (Graves, 1983). However, while focusing on first-grade children, teachers perceived writing differently. They equated writing exclusively to handwriting and copying. A contrast in the teachers' perception was observed when the focus was shifted to young children (Rai, 2015).

Teachers had two main assumptions about first-grade children. Firstly, they believed that first-grade children are young and immature. Hence, they cannot think and write on their own. They repeatedly emphasized that young children lack the necessary abilities required for writing.

Secondly, many of them felt that the background of their first-grade students was inadequate. The deprived environment fails to provide relevant quality experiences to children for writing.

These two assumptions by first-grade teachers highlight their limited understanding of young children's potential. Firstly, extensive research studies from the Western context have presented an entirely different picture of young children's potential in writing. Popular perspectives such as emergent literacy have highlighted the significance of children's agency (Clay, 1982). Emergent literacy emphasizes that young children are active learners. They are sensitive to the existence of print in their surroundings (Clay, 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Goodman, 1985). Children engage with print and develop a detailed understanding of the importance and use of print. The development of writing involves multiple milestones before becoming a conventional writer. All these milestones are legitimate writing attempts as it is done to express a meaningful message (Clay, 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Harste et al., 1984). Secondly, assumptions about children's background as poor and inadequate highlight the deficit perspective (Kumar, 1992). Teachers connected children's academic performance with their background and perceived it as a deficit (Kumar, 1992; Sinha, 2010). It is important to understand that such stereotypes about students' backgrounds are highly dangerous as they can adversely impact children's expectations and achievement in literacy (Au, 2005).

The assumptions of first-grade teachers about children's young age and background greatly influenced their writing pedagogy. The writing instructions used in most of the observed classrooms were traditional, prescriptive, and restricted (Kumar, 1996). Most writing assignments were limited to copy-writing and handwriting practice (Menon et al., 2017; Vagh et al., 2017). The impact of the bottom-up approach was explicitly evident as most of the first-grade teachers were progressing from alphabets to letters.

Analysis of writing samples highlighted significant points. Firstly, similar work was done in all notebooks. This indicates that the work was written on the blackboard, and all students have copied it. Secondly, feedback given by teachers in the notebook was restricted. Correction of the work was denoted mainly by the teachers' signature at the end (Kumar, 1996). In a few notebook samples, phrases such as Good, Neat

Work, *Lekhan Sudharo* (Improve handwriting), and *Galti teen baar likho* (Write three times the words on which you have errors) were given as feedback. The nature of written comments highlights the teachers' focus on the presentation of written work. Most of the first-grade teachers valued accurate copying in beautiful handwriting with no errors.

Educational Implications

The present paper has attempted to explore first-grade teachers' assumptions about the nature of writing in first grade. Teachers' assumptions are a significant factor that impact the nature of pedagogy and learning in the classroom (Brindle et al., 2016; Rai, 2015). As first grade is a foundational grade and writing is a foundational literacy component, understanding assumptions of teachers teaching writing in first-grade becomes a significant area for exploration.

The study highlighted that most teachers had product-oriented pedagogical assumptions about writing (Kumar, 1996). The study's findings highlighted that most first-grade teachers emphasized the bottom-up approach in writing pedagogy. Teachers highly valued mechanical factors such as handwriting, accuracy, and copying. Writing assignments in the classrooms were largely activities like copy-writing and handwriting practice (Menon et al., 2017; Vagh et al., 2017). Most teachers viewed children's young age and background as barriers to creative writing activities. Further, none of the teachers mentioned factors such as voice, desire to convey, need for expression, and process while discussing the writing of first-grade children.

A few educational implications suggested on the basis of the findings are as below:

- We need to acknowledge and strengthen the agency of early-grade teachers. We need to focus on quality early-grade teacher education programmes to empower our teachers. Both pre-service and in-service early-grade teacher education programmes must be revised. Detailed courses on developmental perspectives, such as emergent literacy, writing, and reading, must be included.
- Detailed teachers' manuals on pedagogy of writing must be prepared and provided to teachers. Such reading material will enable teachers to develop an understanding of the field.

- Regular time is a significant factor in writing (Atwell, 1987). Hence, specific time slots or periods for writing must become an essential part of the early grade timetable.

To conclude, it is important to acknowledge that teachers' agencies are vital. The beliefs and viewpoints of teachers deeply impact classroom pedagogy. While teachers' progressive assumptions can empower their writing pedagogy, regressive assumptions can negatively impact it. This negative impact will be problematic for all children, but more specifically damaging for first-generation learners because they depend entirely on school teachers for learning literacy.

There is no doubt that school teachers are significant change-makers. As Goodman and Goodman (2014) also accepted, "no research study, no brilliant discovery, no book, no seminal article, no journal, no programme, no policy, no mandate, no law can change what happens to kids in our schools. Only teachers can do that" (p. 5). Hence, acknowledging and empowering teachers' agencies through quality pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes is the need of the time. Sincere efforts in this direction can significantly change our classroom instructions and practices.

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Nidhi Kunwar is an Associate Professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi. Her specialization is Language Education, Literacy and Writing Research.

nidhikunwar80@gmail.com