

Teaching Writing Hope: A Matter of Social Justice in English Education

CEE Research Initiative Proposal

Aims of Research

The overarching aim of this research is to put hope into action in English education, as was suggested by keynote speaker Dr. Ruth Vinz at the 2013 CEE Summer Conference. Specifically, the primary aims of this study are (1) to discover the influence of writing hope on secondary students' writing achievement and (2) to explore writing hope narratives of secondary students and secondary ELA teachers in order to develop effective, research-based, hope-building strategies for developing writers and teachers.

The secondary aims of this research are:

1. To determine if the writing hope levels of secondary ELA teachers predict the writing hope levels of their students.
2. To explore the narratives of low, moderate, and high hoppers in order to understand influential experiences in building writing hope.
3. To discover and develop effective methods for cultivating writing hope in secondary ELA students in order to teach these methods to pre-service secondary English teachers in teacher education programs.

Although writing across the curriculum has long been an aim of schools of education, English language arts teachers continue to be the primary teachers of writing in secondary schools. However, the Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted in 46 of the 50 states, require all K-12 teachers to be reading and writing teachers, regardless of content area specialization. Therefore, teacher education programs are charged with the task of properly equipping future secondary teachers with the skills to effectively teach their students a process of writing that translates across disciplines and genres. Often this task remains in the hands of the literacy or English education faculty; therefore, the aims of the current research seek to provide English educators with additional tools for teaching writing across the curriculum using developmentally appropriate strategies. Since past research shows that certain dispositional traits influence students' development as writers, it may be necessary to develop certain self-beliefs in secondary school students in order to prepare them to be successful communicators in college and in life. In order to ensure that secondary students are taught using developmentally appropriate writing strategies, English educators could provide pre-service and in-service secondary ELA teachers with instructional strategies for building their students' writing hope levels, thus enhancing their writing proficiency.

Research Questions to be Addressed in Study

Primary Research Question: What are the most effective teaching methods/strategies for building writing hope in secondary ELA students and pre-service secondary ELA teachers?

Quantitative Research Questions:

Research Question 1: To what extent does writing hope predict writing ability in secondary ELA students?

Research Question 2: To what extent are writing hope levels of secondary English teachers related to the writing hope levels of their students?

Research Question 3: To what extent do writing hope instructional intervention strategies influence the development of writing hope and writing ability in secondary ELA students?

Qualitative Research Questions:

Research Question 4: What do secondary ELA students and teachers believe are the most effective methods for teaching writing and writing hope to secondary ELA students?

Research Question 5: Which writing hope strategies should English educators teach to pre-service teachers to aid in their development as writing teachers?

Importance of the Questions for CEE

At the 2013 Conference on English Education (CEE) Summer Conference, Dr. Ruth Vinz called on English educators, ELA teachers, and graduate students to explore, examine, and interrogate the concept of hope in order to explicitly address the rhetoric of hope in education that has been underlying for decades. Vinz (2013) asserts, "Hope is a call to action." Throughout the conference, the thread of building, teaching, and living hope ran through many of the keynote addresses as a call to action for English educators. As such, the following research study would provide insight into how English educators can teach secondary ELA teachers to put hope into action in the classroom by developing secondary students' writing hope agency and pathways for success in college and in life.

In accordance with CEE position statements that aim to understand the most effective methods for educating pre-service English teachers in the context of social justice theory and practice, this study would add to a continuously growing body of research in education: hope pedagogy. Hope is a cyclical, reciprocal self-belief that could provide an initial gateway to opportunities for students. Since writing is a complex skill necessary for success in college and many professions (Barber, 2012; Beaufort, 2007; Brent, 2012; Smagorinsky, 2009), students who develop writing hope may be more likely to meet with success in life since rhetorical skills are necessary in order to work with and compete with other effective communicators (Beaufort, 2007). Whether situations in life call for articulating ideas, defending views, protecting rights, constructing clear interview responses, or conversing fluently with those in power; writing hope will be a valuable trait to possess. Writing fluency can have an impact on success in college and in life because it is a transferrable, cognitive skill that teaches individuals to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information (Barber, 2012; Brent, 2012; Beaufort, 2007). Since recent research indicates that writing hope predicts writing ability in first-year college students (Sieben, 2013), teaching writing hope to secondary students could help to develop their writing fluency as well.

The CEE position statement on "Beliefs about Social Justice in English Education" asks the questions: "*What other fields of study do we need to continue to draw from to help inform a theory for social justice in English education?*" and "*How can a theory for social justice stay committed to being translated into direct classroom practice?*" I believe that the field of positive psychology, especially within the domain of hope theory, has much to contribute to the conversation on social justice in English education. Based on my preliminary research on writing hope, writing hope is a distinct, domain-specific construct that seems to influence students' development as writers (Sieben, 2013). If research about effective hope-building strategies can inform the practice of teaching writing at the secondary level, then English education can continue to make contributions to social justice praxis and put hope into action in educational contexts. Writing fluency is an academic currency that could disrupt and level current systems of inequality that are presently harmful to many school systems and groups in society. Therefore, if effective strategies for teaching writing hope are discovered and delineated, writing hope could be a key factor in creating opportunities for individuals who develop a hope deficit.

Finally, the questions in this proposed plan of study are important contributors in answering one of the particular questions of interest articulated by CEE: "*What are the relationships between research-supported English/language arts education pedagogies and effective secondary teaching?*" In the current educational climate, where high stakes standardized testing, APPR, and Common Core State Standards are at the forefront of the political agenda for education in the United States, understanding a pedagogy of writing hope could inform the development of effective teaching practices for writing teacher education at the K-college levels. This is a necessary contribution to the conversations about educational reform movements today and could provide a revised definition about what it means to be a "college and career ready" writer. The affective, dispositional trait, writing hope can and should be developed in students of all ages, and this study could enlighten

policy makers about the importance of maintaining well-qualified and adequately equipped, certified and professionally trained educators in the American educational system.

Key Related Work in the Research Literature

In education, the term “hope” has been used many ways (Freire, 2004; Giroux, 2003; McInerney, 2007; te Riele, 2010; Vinz, 2013); however, this study uses Snyder’s (1996, 2002) definition of hope—a positive, cognitive-motivational construct containing goals, pathways, and agency—to provide context for understanding students’ perceptions, emotions, and motivations about their writing abilities.

Based on a synthesis of the literature on writing education (Lavelle, 2009), positive psychology (Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011), and hope theory (Snyder et al., 2002); the theoretical frameworks of writing hope are conceived to be the following: the self-belief that one possesses the necessary cognitive (ways) and motivational (will) skills for writing success (Sieben, 2013). Writing hope is a transferrable, dispositional trait that can be transmitted from one writing task to another and one writing context to another when cultivated effectively in educational settings (Sieben, 2013). Therefore, building writing hope in secondary ELA students and in pre-service secondary ELA teachers is not only a matter of building skills for success in school settings, but rather it is a matter of building skills for success in life and is thus an issue of social justice in education. It is for this reason that the primary aims of this proposed research initiative include discovering effective ways for building writing hope in secondary ELA students, so that all students are given equal opportunities for success in school and in life.

The development of writing hope is a worthwhile endeavor because it is predictive of students’ writing achievement and is likely to influence students’ development as writers (Sieben, 2013). The act of writing helps students to remember facts and concepts while developing critical thinking skills; it also allows students to develop a cognitive map that can be frequently reconstructed during revision processes (Lavelle, 1993, 2009). Perhaps even more importantly, writing is an artifact of identity formation; therefore, teachers need to make sure that all students are given the tools to effectively define themselves through the written word (Lavelle, 2009).

Through a critical literacy approach, English educators can teach pre-service and in-service secondary teachers to approach writing instruction as a means of deconstructing and reconstructing power dynamics in society. One of the goals of literacy education is “to liberate and empower students... to question power relationships embedded in texts...and rewrite their worlds for a more just society” (Wallowitz, 2008, p.4). If writing remains a skill of only the privileged, then the power dynamics in society will never change. Through a social justice approach to education, teachers are charged with the task of unpacking “truths that challenge master narratives” (Miller & Kirkland, 2010, p.3). The narratives that “often go untold or ignored altogether” (Miller & Kirkland, 2010, p.3) are often the stories of those students who need to develop their writing skills and hope levels in order to be represented in societal narratives. Students who feel agentic about their identity formation through writing may develop high hope levels about other aspects of their lives and may thus disrupt systems of inequality that set some students up for failure in college and beyond (Brent, 2012). Researching students’ writing hope narratives may lead to an understanding about the interventions that are necessary in building hopeful students in more equitable educational systems.

While some may believe that secondary institutions are not sufficiently preparing students for the rigors of college writing, others argue that colleges and universities are not adequately educating pre-service teachers (Schneider, 2010). A synthesis of national writing studies revealed that “more than two-thirds of middle school students and more than three-fourths of high school students lack proficient writing skills” (Gallagher, 2006, p.6); however, this may not be due to a lack of training in writing skills at the secondary level, but rather may be caused by a lack of development in domain-specific, dispositional traits like writing hope (Bereiter, 1995; Brent, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to

determine the writing hope strategies for writing proficiency in secondary students in order to increase the percentages of students in the United States who are prepared for college writing and the professional world.

Education is often considered a field that can build hope for students, for local communities, and for global societies. In fact, many consider the teaching profession to be a 'discipline of hope' (Kohl, 1998). Hope language is empowering and motivating; however, different fields regard hope to have a different place in society. Educationally, hope has the power to reform educational systems of inequality if teachers believe they can teach hope to their students (Dweck & Molden, 2005; Freire, 2004; Giroux, 2003; McInerney, 2007). Research shows that beliefs can play an instrumental role in facilitating learning and learning approaches (Nietfeld & Enders, 2003). If students and teachers believe that students' self-beliefs are malleable, teaching and learning will be more student-centered, focused on building students' dispositional traits that could influence writing achievement.

Data: Collection & Analysis

If awarded this CEE Research Initiative grant, I would like to conduct a mixed-methods research study to explore the relationship between writing hope and writing ability in secondary ELA students and illuminate instructional needs in English education programs and secondary English language arts classrooms. In order to answer my primary research question to discover the most effective teaching methods for building writing hope in secondary ELA students, I plan to conduct a mixed-methods, experimental study.

Initially, it will be important to quantitatively establish that the construct writing hope does significantly predict writing ability in secondary ELA students. In a recent study writing hope was a significant predictor of writing ability in first-year college students (Sieben, 2013). However, currently, there is no research to support the predictive power of writing hope in projecting secondary students' writing abilities. In order to answer this research question, I will survey a random sample of middle school and/or high school students during the 2014-2015 school year using cluster sampling so that I can survey students in groups determined by class sections. Utilizing cluster sampling will allow me to also survey the ELA teachers of the students whose writing hope levels I will measure. In this way, I will be able to determine to what extent writing hope levels of secondary English teachers influence the writing hope levels of their students. I will survey students and teachers using the Writing Hope Scale (Sieben, 2013), which has statistically significant validity and reliability. To obtain a representative sample of the population of secondary ELA students across the country, I will post requests for participation in this study to the NCTE and NCLE websites if granted permission to do so, and if no responses are received, I will also send out e-mails to administrators in at least 10 public middle schools and high schools in each state (5 middle schools and 5 high schools) to solicit interest in various districts. Each administrator that agrees to participate in this study will be asked to share a list of teacher e-mails who are interested in participating in this study, and then I will communicate directly with teachers who volunteer to be involved. Ideally, I would like to obtain participants from a variety of school districts with different socioeconomic statuses so that I may allow students from diverse backgrounds to have a voice in this study.

The Writing Hope Scale survey will be posted on Qualtrics, an online data collection software program that I have access to through my university. I will provide teachers with the link to the survey, but if teachers and students would prefer to take the survey via hard copy, I will also provide the hard copies. ELA teachers and their students will all take the same 6-item Writing Hope Scale survey. The survey will ask participants to rate their level of agreement or disagreement using a Likert-scale format to communicate their self-beliefs about their writing. Participants will indicate whether they are a student or a teacher, and students will also need to provide the grade that they received in their previous year's English class. In accordance with the ethical guidelines for doing research with human subjects, students will need to have parents sign informed consent forms to

approve their participation in this study given that most secondary students will be under the age of 18. Teachers will also need to sign informed consent forms to participate.

Some participant clusters may choose only to participate in the initial data collection phase of the study; these participants will serve as the control group. However, students and teachers that agree to participate in the instructional intervention portion of the study will each receive a "Writing Hope Goals Journal" with writing prompts, and I will provide a training of writing hope instructional strategies to the teachers who are interested in participating in this portion of the study. These instructional strategies should be implemented by teachers in their ELA classrooms throughout the 2014-2015 school year including the maintenance of a "Writing Hope Goals Journal" (pathways strategy) and the creation of pieces for a student writing self-published book (agency strategy) that I will compile and distribute to participants. Those teachers/students who are willing to participate in part II of the study will also be surveyed again at the end of the year to see if their writing hope levels increased from the writing hope interventions taught in their classrooms; these participants will serve as the experimental group. Those teachers/students who choose not to participate in this second part of the study will also be surveyed again at the end of the school year so that their writing hope scores may be compared to those scores of the experimental group that received the treatment. Statistical tests—correlations, regressions, t-tests, and MANOVAs—will be run in SPSS to analyze the first three quantitative research questions. Data will also be disaggregated by demographics (i.e., gender, race, state school district).

The last two research questions will be answered through interviews and focus groups scheduled with secondary ELA students and teachers at their convenience throughout the course of the year. I will conduct the focus groups for students and teachers separately so that all participants feel comfortable speaking freely. I will transcribe interviews and focus group conversations and then code the data to find themes across interviews and focus groups.

Dissemination of Findings

1. Since the findings from research question one will be collected in September 2014, these findings could be presented at the NCTE 2014 annual meeting.
2. The entire study findings, including specific hope building interventions and the extent of their effectiveness, could be presented at CEE 2015 summer conference, and a manuscript of this study will be submitted to *English Education*.
3. Results will also be shared with teachers who participated in the study who wish to see the results of their students and/or school so that this may inform their future teaching practices.
4. At the culmination of this study, I plan to submit a proposal to *English Journal* to guest-edit a special issue on the topic of "Putting Hope into Action in the ELA Classroom." This issue could provide classroom teachers with additional resources and lessons for teaching hope in the ELA classroom.
5. A writing hope website will be created containing the researched-based resources and strategies proven effective from this study to aid educators in teaching writing hope in secondary classrooms. Student writing pieces will also be shared and featured on the website monthly to provide students with authentic audiences for their writing.
6. I also plan to write an op-ed piece at the culmination of this study on the influence that writing hope could have on redefining "college and career readiness" for secondary students as they develop self-beliefs about their own writing and communication capabilities.

Work Plan: Timeline of Key Events and Processes

January 2014—Reach out to secondary ELA teachers/ administrators through NCTE connected community and NCTE websites to solicit interest in participating in this study.

February 2014—Repost call for participation on websites and send administrators at secondary schools e-mails to inform them about the study and solicit their interest in participation.

March 2014—Confirm at least 4 research sites.

May 2014— Create and produce writing hope intervention materials for participating schools.

July 2014—Deliver writing hope materials and writing hope training for secondary ELA teachers interested in participating in the writing hope instructional intervention phase of the study.

Administer WHS to teachers participating.

August/ September 2014—Administer Writing Hope Scale in first week of school to students.

October 2014—Analyze quantitative data collected from the start of the school year using SPSS.

November 2014—Present findings from first part of the study at NCTE 2014 annual meeting.

September 2014-May 2015— Provide support to teachers implementing writing hope interventions in classrooms and hold interviews and separate focus groups with students and teachers to discover which writing hope interventions they find the most useful/effective in writing development.

May/ June 2015—Administer the Writing Hope Scale in last month of school to students.

June 2015—Analyze all quantitative data collected in the study using SPSS and qualitative data using coding of interviews and focus groups.

July 2015—Present findings at CEE Summer Conference.

Share findings with teachers who participated in the study.

July/ August 2015—Write and submit manuscript to *English Education* to disseminate findings from study.

September 2015—Create writing hope website. Write op-ed piece.

October 2015—Submit proposal to English Journal to guest edit a special issue titled, “Putting Hope into Action in the ELA Classroom.”

Budget with Rationale for All Expenses

1. *Writing Hope Goals Journals* (with writing hope tips and prompts build into the pages) for approximately 100 students = **\$500** (\$5/ journal) This is one instructional strategy for building students’ writing hope pathways for continuous assessment of writing hope goals.
2. Food for focus groups and interviews (e.g., pizza, fruit, bagels, tea, coffee, juice, water) = **\$500** (incentive for students and teachers to participate)
3. Travel money to train teachers at participating schools on writing hope strategies (i.e., flight & train tickets)= **\$700** (Note: I will pay for my own hotel accommodations and/or will attempt to stay with friends and family that live nearby sites if location allows.)
4. Materials for on site teacher trainings: binders containing handouts and training materials= **\$200**
5. Self-published books of student writing (about \$20/100-page bound book)= **\$2000** for approximately 100 students. Students will each receive a book at the end of the year that contains at least one of their pieces of writing from the year that they want to share publicly with others. Participants will have the chance to interact with other students in an online workshop forum and in class to work on their publishable work. (This is one instructional strategy that could build students’ writing hope agency levels.)

Budget Total: \$3,900