# GREEK TEACHERS' PERSONAL THEORY ON WRITING AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL: OPPORTUNITY FOR INNOVATION OR DEFENSE MECHANISM?

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**Abstract** – *In view of the importance of teachers' personal theories on their education, teaching and in-sevice education, this study aims to examine Greek elementary school teachers' personal theory on students writing. Forty-two teachers of both genders, varying in years of experience, serving in urban and suburban schools, filled in a questionnaire. This was made up of closed and open-ended questions concerning their knowledge, attitudes and assessment on (a) conditions surrounding students' writing, (b) the actual teaching of writing in their context, and (c) their evaluation of students' writing. The data was examined through both qualitative and quantitative means. The findings indicated that teachers see good writing not as a teachable skill, but as a gift; their role as only that of a judge and not as a helper or a collaborator; students' writing as a product and not a process and as 'knowledge telling' and 'knowledge transforming'. A discussion of these findings in relation to changing teachers' personal theory follows.*

## Introduction

Teachers' conceptions about learning, their beliefs about knowledge, as well as about learners, their more general individual epistemological theories or domain-specific theories, constitute what is labelled 'personal theories'. The term theory, in the scientific context, commonly refers to an interrelated set of hypotheses or statements that can be used to explain phenomena or to predict what will happen when certain conditions exist. In the context of teachers' personal theory, or practical theory, it refers to a person's private, integrated but ever-changing system of knowledge, experience and values that is relevant to the practice of teaching. It is a personal construct mediated by a multitude of personal and professional experiences (Handal and Lauvås, 1987).

Teachers' personal theories are a relatively recent focus of research. This study of teachers' personal theories was facilitated by a number of socio-political and epistemological concerns. It sought to represent teachers' own perspectives on their knowledge and practice. These perspectives have become of relevance as a

result of the rise of cognitive psychology, the shifting of the positivistic epistemological paradigm to a more interpretational one, and a greater emphasis on critical pedagogy (e.g. Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Elbaz, 1991; Shavelson and Stern, 1981).

Accompanying these developments have been a number of practical factors which have led to the current interest in the area of 'personal theory' as an educational research focal point. Among these is the idea that epistemological assumptions influence the thinking and reasoning process of teachers as well as the way they view and interpret the thinking and learning of their students. These in turn are thought to have a direct effect on the way they view good teaching and learning in the classroom and on how they proceed to implement and evaluate this effective teaching (Huber, 1989; Gardner, 1991; Strauss, 1993).

A growing concern focusing on establishing relations between research on teaching and teacher education has led to the notion that the teachers' conception of learning can influence their 'learning to teach process'. In effect, the student teachers bring with them prior conceptions and beliefs about knowledge and teaching, implicit or explicit, which influence their initial education (Calderhead, 1991). The same is true for situations of in-service education or experienced teachers (Kagan, 1992). The restructuring of pre-existing beliefs and ideas held by student teachers' – and we should add experienced teachers' – as Tillema (1997) argues, could be a more important goal to address in programmes of teacher education than the presentation of new information itself. This is a crucial point in any endeavour that aims at introducing innovations to education.

Additionally, probing the ideas of individuals and facilitating the externalisation and explicit analysis of often tacit conceptions, including knowledge and beliefs, grants us a unique opportunity to explore these important variables and to consider their implications for instructional practice and educational research (Alexander and Dochy, 1995).

Our time is one of very rapid change in the ways in which we view our aims and ourselves in education, amid shifting epistemological paradigms and educational reforms and innovations. Therefore, it is of unquestioned importance that we uncover and understand the pre-existing concepts, beliefs and attitudes or teachers towards more general epistemological concerns as well as towards more domain specific issues, i.e. their personal theory. This personal theory is the filter through which students or practitioners judge and accept or reject the educational research findings (Tillema, 1995). Therefore by extension, personal theory will be viewed as a key component which, along with scientific evidence and research, may more adequately inform our approach to teacher education. Indeed, unless

practitioners' knowledge and beliefs are uncovered and understood, our understanding of the processes that direct teacher's actual behaviour in the classroom and vis-à-vis their students may be incomplete.

On the other hand, teachers' personal theories are communicated in the classroom environment. That is why identification of the various instructional elements that carry epistemological impact is essential. These elements might include the nature of tasks to be performed in and out of classroom, teachers' and students' talk, textbook use, as well as student testing and evaluation (Hofer and Pintrich, 1997). Alternatively, they might more generally include how teachers define the learning environment, or respond to particular instructional materials, or approaches (e.g. Anders and Evans, 1994).

In recent years a considerable part of the research on epistemological beliefs and personal theories has been devoted to general ideas, such as the nature of knowledge or the act of knowing (e.g. Hofer and Pintrich, 1997). Study of individual knowledge about a particular field or study or academic discipline – what is referred to as 'domain-specific theory' – has been accorded less prominence. Although there are studies on domain-specific beliefs in mathematics (e.g. Shoenfeld, 1992), in the physical sciences (e.g. De Jong and Brinkman, 1997), and in reading (e.g. Richardson, 1994; Schommer, 1994), there is limited research in the area of writing. The present study focuses on the latter area, and more specifically on the domain of elementary school teachers beliefs about writing.

There are several probable explanations for the paucity of studies related to teachers' personal theory and the teaching of writing. Among these could be the lack of a guiding theoretical conceptualisation of the process of learning to write and the role of the teacher as to what to teach, how to teach it and why (Langer and Applebee, 1987).

In existing studies of teachers' personal theories, language (in interviews, written response and questionnaires) has become the vehicle through which access to teachers' inner world has been revealed. The present study shares the idea that words people choose are critical markers of their implicit theories (Olson and Astington, 1993) using the questionnaire as the principal research tool. However, unlike other researchers, we did not ask teachers direct questions on their beliefs about writing. Instead we attempted to obtain the information indirectly by asking them to report on how they view the curriculum prescribed for them, how they confront it in their every day practice, and what they think should be done for a more effective teaching (and consequently better writing products). We adopted this strategy because we hypothesised that, through these means, the teachers' domain-specific beliefs about the teaching/learning of writing could emerge and be reconstructed.

So as to not preclude the use of a varied terminology and possibly conceptual confusion, it might be appropriate to point out that, definitions of the construct of epistemological beliefs and the elements and dimensions that constitute individual theories and beliefs show a lack of conceptual clarity. Hofer and Pintrich (1997) present a thorough review of the issue. For example, there are efforts to differentiate between knowledge and beliefs (Fenstermacher, 1994). Clandinin and Connelly (1886) propose the use of the term 'personal practical knowledge' to refer to how a teacher knows and understands a classroom situation. By contrast, Hofer and Pintrich (1997) put forth the idea that individuals' beliefs about knowledge and the process of knowing be considered as 'personal theories'.

In view of the above, in this paper, we will present the personal theories on writing of a representative sample of forty-one elementary school teachers from urban, suburban and rural areas of the Southwestern Peloponnese region of Greece. This investigation is part of a broader research project that focuses on the teaching and production of writing at the upper level of the Greek elementary school with students aged 10-12 years old.

## Method

The data for this investigation were collected through the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was comprised of both closed and open-ended questions that were concerned with (a) the conditions surrounding students' writing, (b) the actual teaching of writing and (c) teacher evaluation of student writing. By asking these questions, we attempted to ascertain two things. First, we tried to determine what teachers think and feel about the actual provision of the curriculum in relation to writing. Second, we set out to allow them to describe what *they* think would be a better approach for teaching students' writing. By employing this dual focus probing, we hypothesised that we would obliquely tap the teachers' implicit theories about what constitutes good writing and how this could be taught.

The participating schools and teachers were selected in order to represent the spread of the Greek population that is urban, suburban and rural. All teachers taught both boys and girls. Twenty-four of them were fourth grade teachers and the remaining were sixth grade teachers, of both genders, varying in teaching experience and age. Of those approached, forty-one teachers filled and returned the questionnaire and these constitute the subjects of the study. The responses were analysed using quantitative analysis or qualitative content analysis depending on the nature of the data. The quantitative data – i.e. frequencies and percentages of the close-ended question responses – are presented first in Tables

1, 3 and 5. The qualitative data, presented in Tables 2, 4 and 6, reflect the frequency with which each construct was found in the content analysis of the open-ended questionnaire questions.

To understand the findings and draw their implications, one has to keep in mind several key features of the Greek educational system. These in particular include the fact that the system is highly centralised, that it enforces an extremely detailed curriculum which is expected to be applied across the entire country, and that it is implemented through a series of grade specific language arts textbooks and teacher guidebooks, wherein *everything* is prescribed in detail. Students' creative, expressive writing, which is the focus of our interest here, is prescribed – and that includes the topic to be implemented several times a week in the language arts textbooks under the section titled 'I think and I write'. Usually, the assigned topic for writing is connected with what has already been read and discussed during the previous hour, and the writing either precedes or follows other exercises in the area of language arts as is detailed in the student textbooks and teacher guidebooks. The allotted time for writing is usually ten to fifteen minutes. This time includes both teacher introduction and student preparation as well as actual writing. The teacher is advised to read these writing assignments, to conduct some evaluation (this facet is less well defined than it perhaps should be in the teacher guidebooks), and then to display all the student products on the wall or bulletin board for a day or two. The interpretation of the findings and what will be presented in this paper should be viewed against this centralised and highly prescribed background.

## Findings

In each part of the three main questions asked, quantitative data (frequencies and percentages) are presented first. Next presented are qualitative data, including the time a concept/idea occurs in the teachers' answers to the open-ended questions.

The teachers' thinking on the conditions surrounding student's writing (Table 1) mainly focuses on the lack of sufficient time, either for actual students writing or for discussing with their teacher the relevant issues related to writing before and after the writing act.

They find the students' motivation for writing rather low and although they think that textbooks do not promote good writing, they are unsure whether the curriculum is responsible for the students' poor writing skills. Table 2 reveals that topics for writing related to text that were read and discussed and expected to promote good writing in fact impede good writing. Teachers see systematic

*TABLE 1: Teachers thinking on conditions surrounding students' writing*

|  | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Time allocated | | |
|     up to 15' | 6 | 15 |
|     up to 30' | 22 | 55 |
|     as needed | 12 | 30 |
| Estimate of needed time | | |
|     The allocated (10'-15') is not adequate | 20 | 50 |
|     Time should be allocated to the specific needs | 19 | 47 |
| Perceived usefulness of discussion before writing | | |
|     high | 26 | 65 |
|     medium | 14 | 35 |
|     low | 1 | 2 |
| Students' motivation for writing | | |
|     low | 26 | 68 |
|     high | 10 | 26 |
| Evaluation of text books quality in promoting good writing | | |
|     high quality | 4 | 10 |
|     medium quality | 6 | 15 |
|     low quality | 30 | 75 |
| Evaluation of the curriculum's responsibility for students' weakness in writing | | |
|     highly responsible | 14 | 37 |
|     mildly responsible | 19 | 50 |
|     not responsible | 5 | 13 |

teaching of grammar as more important than teaching writing or changing the textbooks in order to improve students writing.

The quantitative data about actual teaching of writing in Table 3 are less revealing than the qualitative ones. In the former there is a preoccupation with topics related to the students' experience, the transfer of learning from grammar exercises to actual spelling in students' writing. They are concerned that there isn't very much transfer and they are again concerned with the problem of the shortage of time for teaching writing. However, they are not quite sure if this teaching would be of any use. In the qualitative data about actual teaching of writing (See Table 4) teachers

*TABLE 2: Teachers thinking on conditions surrounding students' writing (qualitative data)*

|  | f of occurrence |
|---|---|
| Elements of curriculum perceived as promoting good writing | |
|     direct relation of topics with the texts presented in reading | 10 |
|     possibility of topic change | 6 |
|     opportunity to write often (2-3 times/week) | 3 |
| Elements of the curriculum perceived as negative in promoting good writing | |
|     lack of time (for discussion, for practice, for setting specific time for writing) | 13 |
|     lack os specific time for teaching how to write | 4 |
|     inappropriate/indifferent topics | 5 |
|     not using writing across the curriculum | 1 |
|     lack of the opportunity for rewriting | 1 |
| Changes of the curriculum perceived as necessary in order to avoid students' weaknesses in writing | |
|     specific/more time for writing | 11 |
|     systematic and more appropriate teaching of grammar | 9 |
|     systematic teaching of writing throu new approaches, genres | 6 |
|     change the Language Arts textbooks (as being poor in content, lacking in literary texts, extended in coverage) | 4 |

*TABLE 3: Teachers thinking on actual teaching: real circumstances and proposed ones (quantitative data)*

|  | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Perceived usefulness of topics related only to personal experience | | |
|     useful | 23 | 57 |
|     restrictive | 14 | 35 |
| Teachers' intervention for change during students' writing | | |
|     seldom or hardly ever | 10 | 25 |
|     sometimes | 28 | 70 |
| Transfer of learning of grammar/spelling exercises to students' writing | | |
|     high transfer | 3 | 7 |
|     medium transfer | 27 | 67 |
| Perceived usefulness of allocating specific time for teaching of writing | | |
|     very useful | 14 | 35 |
|     rather useful | 21 | 52 |
|     not at all | 5 | 12 |

*TABLE 4: Teachers thinking on actual teaching: Real circumstances and proposed ones (qualitative data)*

|  | f of occurrence |
|---|---|
| Perceived causes of low/no transfer of knowledge gained in the language arts exercises to spelling in students writings | |
|     mechanical nature of exercises | . 8 |
|     no systematic – scattered teaching of grammar | 5 |
| | |
| Teacher's self-reported strategies (their strengths) in relation to promoting good writing | |
|     discussion of the topic before writing | 5 |
|     discussion of the evaluation after the writing | 5 |
|     presenting various genres | 5 |
|     encourage reading outside school work | 5 |
|     individualising | 3 |
|     systematic teaching of grammar | 3 |
|     writing on different topics | 2 |
|     using self-correction | 2 |
|     using dialogue across curriculum | 2 |
| | |
| Teachers' self-reported inadequancies in promoting good writing | |
|     change the curriculum, write new text books | 2 |
|     more practice on oral and written language | 1 |
|     systematic teaching of the art of writing | 1 |
|     systematic evaluation from the teacher | 1 |
|     give a whole hour time for writing each time | 1 |

are asked to report the strategies which they think constitute their strength in the actual teaching of writing. By asking this open-ended question we had hoped to elicit what teachers consider to be 'good practice' in the area of writing rather than what they are actually doing in the classroom in teaching writing. This is because our aim was to reveal their beliefs, their personal theory about writing and how they believe writing should be taught in the classroom. Discussion before and after writing and across curriculum is considered by these teachers to be a prominent strategy of good teaching practice. Other strategies include care to expand the children's horizons by introducing various genres, topics, styles, and the encouragement of reading outside the realm of schoolwork. In addition, it is believed that there is a need for students to obtain experience writing on a variety of different topics aside from those prescribed in the curriculum.

*TABLE 5: Teachers thinking on evaluation of students' writing*

|  | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Perceived usefulness of focus on spelling and grammar in evaluation | | |
| very useful | 22 | 55 |
| rather useful | 17 | 42 |
| minimally useful | 1 | 2 |
| Perceived usefulness of focus on content in evaluation | | |
| very useful | 13 | 34 |
| rather useful | 20 | 53 |
| minimally useful | 5 | 13 |
| Frequency of written comments on student's writing | | |
| always | 9 | 22 |
| sometimes | 16 | 40 |
| never | 1 | 2 |
| Displaying of student's writing | | |
| always | 5 | 12 |
| sometimes | 20 | 53 |
| never | 10 | 25 |

In the present study, systematic teaching of grammar, attention to the individual needs of students, and self-correction of one's writings were found to be accorded the last place in the teachers' thinking about strategies that promote good writing. As can be seen from the tables, only four teachers answered the last question about perceived teachers' inadequacies in promoting good writing; some did point to other things but these were unrelated to their teaching, and only one pointed to the need for the teacher to teach writing systematically, while another one to the need for systematic evaluation of students' writings.

Teachers' ideas and thinking about student evaluation (Table 5) are more revealing. This quantitative part shows that a focus on spelling and grammar is thought of as being more useful than a focus on the content of writing. But the qualitative data (See Table 6) shed even more light on the way teachers conceive of and implement students' writing evaluation.

When discussing their writing with the students, the teachers' main concern is more with mistakes relating to spelling and expression and with syntactical errors rather than with other aspects related to content. However, when asked expressly about the usefulness of focusing on the content of students' writing, teachers mainly stressed the task's usefulness in helping students avoid mistakes in the future, and in learning to keep to the topic at hand. They considered other aspects to be marginal.

*TABLE 6: Teachers thinking on education of students' writing (qualitative data)*

|  | f of occurrence |
|---|---|
| Points pondered at when discussing with students in class about their writings | |
|     spelling and punctuation mistakes | 20 |
|     expression mistakes | 14 |
|     expression (in general, meaning rather problematic) | 12 |
|     coverage of the topic | 7 |
|     organisation and structure | 7 |
|     syntax mistakes | 6 |
|     cohesion | 5 |
|     on-off topic | 4 |
|     vocabulary | 4 |
|     imagination, originality, beauty | 4 |
|     positive elements | 3 |
|     sentences – paragraphs | 3 |
|     wealth of ideas | 1 |
|     what else could be written | 1 |
| | |
| Reasons why focusing on content enables to write more successfully | |
|     next time students will avoid the mistakes pointed out | 5 |
|     enables students to stay in the boundaries of the topic | 4 |
|     enriches vocabulary | 1 |
|     gives more information | 1 |
|     content is related to students knowledge, if they have it, they will express themselves right | 1 |
|     it is useful as studying any text | 1 |
|     students are helped to see different aspects of the topic | 1 |
| | |
| Actual focus on specific aspects of the content of students writing | |
|     mistakes (expressive, spelling, syntax, grammar) | 15 |
|     topic (on-off, coverage, understanding main points) | 15 |
|     right expression (unclear meaning, they may mean mistakes) | 8 |
|     structure | 8 |
|     rationality, order of parts | 6 |
|     cohesion | 4 |
|     originality | 4 |

| | f of occurrence |
|---|---|
| Focus perceived as optimal, when discussing content of students writing | |
|     right / fluid / enriched expression | 5 |
|     rationality / order | 2 |
|     appearance | 1 |
|     clarity | 1 |
|     authenticity | 1 |
|     studying / analysing literary texts | 1 |
|     personal experiences | 1 |
| Perceived difficulties in evaluating students writing | |
|     mistakes of expression and spelling | 19 |
|     bad handwriting | 9 |
|     lack of cohesion | 3 |
|     lack of time to discuss with the student and give appropriate feedbacks | 2 |
| Teachers written comments on students writings, refer mainly to | |
|     mistakes of spelling, syntax, punctuation | 17 |
|     content | 8 |
|     expression (unclear meaning, probably problematic expression | 8 |
|     topic (on-off, omissions, coverage) | 10 |
|     encouraging comments | 5 |
|     appearance | 3 |
|     structure | 3 |
| Perceived causes of students poor writing (curriculum not included) | |
|     familys low socioeducational level | 5 |
|     primacy of image / TV | 3 |
|     not reading books on their own | 3 |
|     trends in modern life (confusion, alienation, poor models) | 2 |
|     inadequate time for oral language practice | 2 |
|     marginalization of writing | 1 |
|     unclear aims and goals in education | 1 |
|     low general achievement | 1 |
|     absence of dialogue | 1 |

|  | f of occurrence |
|---|---|
| Perceived remedies for making the evaluation of writing more effective | |
| change of the teaching of grammar | 5 |
| give more time for teaching, evaluation and writing | 3 |
| group evaluation | 3 |
| assign specific time for writing | 1 |
| systematic teaching of how to write | 1 |
| self-correction and evaluation | 1 |
| Criteria in evaluating students writing | |
| right expression (some given definitions: no mistakes, adequate, fluid, natural, clear, complete, vivid, figurative, rich, good use of language | |
| not being off-topic | 21 |
| correct spelling | 20 |
| organisation | 11 |
| vocabulary | 8 |
| cohesion | 8 |
| imagination / originality | 6 |
| appearance (neatness, good handwriting) | 6 |

It is important to ask what topics teachers stress in their evaluation when they focus on content. Here again, teachers in our study indicated that they focus on mistakes and keeping to the topic set, while structure, rational order, and cohesion do not appear to them to be as crucial. Originality was accorded the last place. In discussing the content of writing, teachers perceive that the optimal focus should be the right expression. When teachers write comments on student's writings (which they do not do very often) they focus mainly upon mistakes, problems of topic, and of expression. Other issues are put aside.

The last topic about the criteria in evaluating students writing gives a fuller picture of what teachers think good writing is. The lion's share of their interest, once again, was in students not making mistakes, and not going off the point when addressing a particular topic. Expression (which includes avoiding related mistakes), defined in a variety of ways, was a second consideration. Organisation, cohesion and vocabulary followed. Imagination and originality shared the last place, along with the written product's visual appearance.

Who is to blame for students poor writing? Teachers referred to the role of the family, the society at large and only very few blamed the problem on poor teaching.

## Discussion

What can be inferred about the personal theory on writing of our study's teachers from their self-reported ideas, practices, estimates and evaluations, as presented in the findings' section? We shall attempt to answer this in two ways. Firstly, we will try to reconstruct the teachers' personal theories through their statements, because any study of what teachers know depends, at least in part, on an analysis of what they say. Secondly, we will try to reconstruct the teachers' personal theories from what they are not saying, in other words, from their omissions. This relationship between the teachers' use of language in order to express the world has formed the foundation for the study of teachers' knowledge, beliefs or personal theories (Freeman, 1994). In this view it is assumed that words can represent thought, that teachers' language data represent and are isomorphic to their thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, feelings and so on. This is the 'representation' approach to using language data in relation to studying teachers thinking. Representational analysis, however, overlooks what is known about the fundamentally social character of language in creating meaning. Alternatively a 'presentational' approach to language data collected from teachers focuses on the interrelationship between what is said about the teacher's inner world, and how it is said, i.e. how it is expressed and the context of this 'presentation' (Freeman, 1994). Presentation analysis focuses on instances of the presence, absence and interrelation among these language data which are known as 'discourses', i.e. ways of being in the world (Freeman, 1993). Although this study clings to the representational approach, it is nevertheless also inspired by the 'presentational' one when if focuses on the absences, i.e. on what is not said and why it is not said.

Through the medium of the first method, that is, focusing on what teachers say, writing is viewed as an expression of the self. When they are writing, the students' express themselves. The word 'expression', as right or wrong expression, appears very often in teachers' responses. When students express themselves through their writing, they do it in one and only one event. Writing results in a finished product, which, in order to improve, may require more time for pre- and post-discussion as well as for the actual act of writing itself, because only 15 to 20 minutes are presently being allotted to writing. Good writing, as revealed by the data, does not seem to be related firmly to the provisions of the curriculum or to textbooks or for that matter, to teachers' know-how. It does not appear to be considered a teachable

topic at all. Good writing is something you have or do not have, like a gift. If you do not have it, family and/or society are perceived as the main culprits. The only aspect of teaching writing is discussing pre- and post-writing, mainly about how to avoid – or about mistakes committed in – spelling, expression, and syntax. Content, organisation and wealth of ideas are marginal. From what is stated in the teachers' responses one is inclined to conclude that the study's teachers approach writing from a secret*arial* rather than from an *authorial* point of view (Smith, 1994).

If one turns now to the second way of reconstructing teachers' personal theory about writing, namely from what they do *not* say, such omissions help us understand other aspects of the picture we are trying to portray. It becomes clear that the concept of writing as a process is absent. The process approach which explicitly helps students develop the cognitive, affective and verbal abilities that underlie effective writing seems a *terra ignota* to the teachers. There is no notion of teachers' intervention in the various processes surrounding and underlying the writing, such as social processes and contexts, cognitive, affective and verbal processes, the creative process of the writer and text, the communicative process of the reader and written text (Coe, 1989).

Teachers of this study conceptualised writing along the lines of what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) refer to as the 'knowledge-telling' model of writing. The characteristics of this model comprise topical coherence, congruence with pre-established structural discourse schemata (i.e. narrative, argumentative, etc.) and weak adaptation of content to the audience. The opposite of this is the 'knowledge-transforming' model, a model of intentional writing. It involves the setting of goals to be achieved through the compositional process and the purposeful pursuit of those goals. It does not depend on evoked memories and emotions or on external assistance for its direction. There is no evidence that the participants of this study are knowledgeable or are preoccupied with this aspect of writing as knowledge-transforming. They appear not to be aware of the extent of the composing process. Pre-writing search, planning, drafting, revising, redrafting and editing are missing from the data not only as terms, but also as concepts, despite the well known works of Calkins (1986), Graves (1983) and many others. Over and above the omission of the cognitive aspect, one could point to the lack of notions about the social aspect of writing. As socio-cognitive perspectives on literacy indicate, attention to this aspect would help addressing fruitfully issues of curriculum and schooling (Langer and Allington, 1992).

Teachers' responses reveal that they view themselves as judges of the product of students' writing rather than as collaborators and helpers in the process of writing. There is no notion of a genuine response to the process of the students' production of text, and to the product of writing (Scardanalia and Bereiter, 1983;

Calkins, 1983). The teachers' responses, though, are an important component of a dynamic socio-cognitive practice that creates an ongoing classroom discourse about teaching and writing. The teachers' responses ought to serve a wide variety of social and political purposes in addition to remedial ones. Comments shape and are shaped by the context. Comments ought to be a dialogue between teacher and student where modes of expression, i.e. pronouns, imperatives, and questions, embody and reveal teachers' ideology and purpose (Troen and Katznelson, 1996). Beson (1993) devised three categories of remedial responses, (a) to help students correct a problem, (b) to praise, and (c) to provide reader response feedback without explicitly judging the writings. Of these, the teachers of this study preferred the first two in their rather rare and telegraphic responses (usually one to three words). The same was true for their more frequent oral responses. On the other hand, their insistence on pointing to correcting or helping students avoid mistakes revealed their tendency towards an authoritarian style of response which is by no means a uniquely Greek phenomenon (Connors and Lundsford, 1993).

Additionally, the data provides little insight about the teachers' awareness of their role in supporting and developing their pupils' writing and their role in the process as organisers, activity setters, readers, and fellow-practitioners of the art of writing (Wray and Medwell, 1991). The role of assessor-judge is the only prominent one identified.

Turning to the last question, we found that if this was a rough sketch of teachers' personal theories on writing at the elementary school, it both facilitates the introduction of much needed innovations while at the same time constituting a defence. The opportunity for innovation and change could arise from a felt dissatisfaction, a discontent, which is expressed in many instances in the teachers' writing. This discontent could open the way for the search for alternative approaches and for change which, as Piagetian perspectives would have it, are the result of processes which destabilise, deconstruct, and unbalance inner worlds. The next step is reconstruction at a higher level, one that is more appropriate to solving the problems of teaching writing.

At the same time, the lack of knowledge and awareness of the findings of recent research about writing, on the part of the teachers involved in this study, constitutes a defence. If they do not know the alternative, the alternative does not exist for them. That explains why, when frustrated and unhappy about the present situation, they blame external or peripheral factors.

The changing of beliefs and parts of personal theory is not an easy accomplishment (Huber, 1987; Matsagouras, 1998). It is evident that deeply entrenched patterns or belief and practice cannot be altered through exhortation, sanctions, new technology or a series of workshops. Understanding the nature and functions of persistence, the need for opportunities for teacher learning and

development, as well as developing the broader organisational political and economic contexts to support change and new practice are among the means to that end (Smylie, 1996).

Richardson (1994) has argued that in order to bring about desired changes three forms of knowledge and beliefs should be woven together in an interactive dialogical manner. The first is teachers' beliefs or practical knowledge that are seldom articulated and therefore not examined. The articulation of these beliefs and descriptions allows teachers to examine them in relation to theories and practices stemming from current research. The second form is the formal theoretical frameworks of current research and scholarship. The third is alternative classroom practices that provide concrete evidence in support of both teachers' beliefs and research knowledge.

The authors believe that the contribution of their study lies in the revealing omissions of Greek teachers' personal theory vs. the current theory and research on writing. This is an attempt to articulate the usually potent and implicit personal theory and pointing to what Smylie (1996) refers to as the nature and function of persistence.

These omissions, as well as their misconceptions concerning students writing and their own teaching of it, should be attributed to weaknesses of their initial and in-service education. Teacher education and educational research have had a tendency to go their separate ways in Greece, when the idea is that they should inform each other.

The implications of this study are evident. Greek teachers' personal theory of writing is lacking in several key and crucial areas. In part, this is due to their ignorance of the research findings related to the theory on writing of the last twenty years. Unless vigorous measures are taken to overcome the ramifications caused by these gaps in knowledge, it will be difficult at best to meet the broadly publicised innovations proposed by the Greek Ministry of Education. Pre- and in-service teacher education in the area of teaching literacy, and especially writing, is an immediate priority, as they, in large part, form the basis for successful learning in the other academic domains and are thus of critical importance.

Education and staff development will not however bring about the desired results unless teachers combine it with an awareness of themselves as persons and teachers. It requires teachers to adopt a strategy of continuous self-questioning regarding what they are trying to convey, to whom, and for what purpose. It is this reflective stance which allows teachers to remain open to change and to welcome innovation (Papoulia-Tzelepi, 1993, 1996; Richardson and Anders, 1994).

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# APPENDIX

## Greek teachers' personal theory on writing
## at the elementary level

### Questionnaire

- Small introductory letter
- Demographic data: Gender, age, years of experience, classes usually taught.

### *Questions: Close–ended, open-ended, hierarchical placement.*

1. How much time do you give to your students for the completion of the task 'I think and I write'?
2. Do you think that the 15 minutes, suggested by the curriculum guide, is appropriate?
2a. If not appropriate how much time do you think it should be given?
3. According to your experience children involved in writing this task are well motivated, neutral or reluctant?
3a. If they are not motivated, or reluctant, what are the causes, according to your personal thinking?
4. Which is more important for children in order to write successfully: experience, knowledge, teaching, or other?
5. Besides the texts in the basic reader, what other means or tools do you use in order to boost creative writing quality in your students?
6. How relevant to your students do you judge the given topics?
7. How often do you change the topics given by the reader and instead give your own selection?
7a. Why do you do this?
7b. On what occasions do you do this?
8. Do you judge that the texts of the basic readers (on which the task of creative writing is usually based) create activities and situations enabling students to express themselves in authentic writing?
9. Do you think that the given topics should only refer to students every day experience?
9a. If yes, why?
9b. If no, what other topic(s) should be suggested?
10. Do you intervene during student's writing?
    10a. Why do you do what you do?
    10b. In what circumstances do you do it?
11. Do you believe that giving specific time for teaching how to 'write' would help students to achieve more?
12. How much transfer from the specific exercises (spelling, grammar, etc.) is accomplished in the 'I think and I write' exercises?
12a. If not much transfer is accomplished, what are the causes?
13. Do children always paste their writing on the board (as suggested by the teachers' guide)?

14. Do you discuss students' writings in class?
    14a. What are the main points of discussion?
15. Do you believe that dialogue and interaction in class could facilitate writing?
16. Do you think that focusing on the content could ameliorate the students' ability in writing?
16a. Why?
16b. Which are the points of students writing that you focus on?
17. Do you believe that focusing on spelling mistakes and on inappropriate expressions help students to become better writers?
18. How often do you use written comments on students' writings?
18a. They (the comments) usually refer to what?
19. Do you believe that by systematically teaching different genres and a variety of texts (narrative, expository, etc) students achievement in writing would be higher?
20. According to your experience, what are the weaknesses of students writing? (the three most common).
21. Is the curriculum the culprit for these weaknesses?
    21a. If yes, what, do you think, should change?
    21b. If no, what, according to you, are the causes for the weakness?
22. Do you experience difficulties correcting students' writings?
22a. If any, what are they?
22b. In which way, do you think they should be faced?
23. Which are your criteria for successful students' writings?
24. What points of the Curriculum (for writing) do you judge as positive and what do you judge as negative?
25. What are your teaching strategies (in writing) that you think of as your strength?
26. What are the elements of your teaching, concerning students' writing, that you judge as negative and would like to change?