"I suck at writing. I’m good at math, though!” “Writing papers is not fun, it’s hard. I never get to write about cool stuff, we have to write about a stupid book or something.” “I love writing.” “I don’t like to write at all. It takes me too long.” “I was born with no interest in writing and never want to do it again.” “I hate writing.” “I don’t mind writing, but I seem to always get bad grades, no matter how good or bad I do.” “I like to write, but only about things I enjoy . . . get me excited to write.” “I pretty much hate writing, unless it’s a topic that I choose or am interested in.” “I absolutely love writing, but that’s no thanks to my teachers.” “I really enjoy writing.” “I like writing when the topic is good.” “I avoid writing.” “I’m really bad at writing!” “Writing is hard work and for the patient.”

The above quotes are from high school juniors and seniors who were asked to give their thoughts or feelings about past writing experiences. What is perhaps most remarkable about the responses is that each student who responded to this question did so with such strong emotion. Whether declaring love or hatred for writing, each student did so with such conviction and certainty that there is little room left for argument. How can the act of writing elicit such strong emotional reactions? How can so many students hate writing, and so many others love it? Perhaps more importantly, why do so many students label themselves as “bad” writers?

Surely the answers to these questions can vary for each individual student. For some, it may have been former experiences or poor evaluations of past writing that have shaped current beliefs. However, for other students, the reasons for these self-assessments may be more abstract. Some students may believe that they cannot write because they were not born with the ability to do so, what educators call “giftedness.” Students may also believe, whether related to a belief in giftedness or not, that their current teachers and/or the current teaching system do not have the ability to teach them the necessary skills to help them become proficient writers.

In this study, I have surveyed 329 high school juniors and seniors to determine to what degree students have beliefs in giftedness, as well as to assess their views of teacher competence. The object of this research was to discover whether the above factors affected student self-assessments in writing. I also wanted to discover if, and in what ways, each of these categories directly affected one another. While my research did not find strong correlations between any of these ideas, some consistent patterns did emerge, and trends developed, providing significant topics for discussion.

Beliefs in Giftedness

Hugh Blair defines the term genius as “talent or aptitude which we receive from nature, for excelling in any one thing whatever [. . .]. By art and study, no doubt it can be improved; but by them alone it cannot be acquired” (41). The implications of this belief can extend easily to writing. If stu-
dent believe writing is a gift one is born with or without, it may be easily assumed that such students, if discouraged by negative writing experiences, would label themselves poor writers, a self-assessment justified by the belief that they lack the gift for writing. Palmquist and Young conducted a study of 247 postsecondary students in an attempt to find correlations between beliefs in giftedness and writing self-assessments. They found that “[s]tudents who believed more strongly that writing ability is a gift tended to have (a) higher levels of writing apprehension and (b) lower self-assessments of their ability as writers” (150). When students adhere to this “notion of giftedness,” as Palmquist and Young describe it, or genius, they throw their hands up, as it were, and quit writing altogether. Palmquist and Young illustrate this hopelessness: “Students who believe they lack the gift for writing are often anxious about their writing and may turn, when they can, to other studies for which writing well is not a requirement. If you can’t write well, they seem to believe, why keep beating your head against a wall?” (138).

So, is this “notion of giftedness” real? Some would argue that it is only a crutch. Meghan O’Rourke writes in her article “The Copycat Syndrome”:

As preternaturally gifted distance runner Steve Prefontaine puts it in the 1998 biopic Without Limits, “Talent is a myth.” And recent studies have shown that the old joke about how to get to Carnegie Hall is based in quantifiable fact: The top tier of 20-year-old violinists, it turns out, practiced on average 2,500 hours more than violinists the next rank down. Yet contemporary culture pays quite a lot of lip service to the myth of innate talent. (2)

That is, whether one is a runner or a violinist, there is an element of work, effort, and learned ability involved in success. While it would be difficult to argue that some aren’t born with a greater propensity toward certain skills, to believe that such is the only requisite for success would certainly discount all the hard work and human triumph that many masters have invested to be where they are in their fields. This can pertain to writers as well. Many successful writers would take offense if others believed their work was merely a matter of biological chance, ignoring all the work and effort involved.

Beliefs in Teacher Competence

In his article “Learning ‘Schooled Literacy’: The Literate Life Histories of Mainstream Student Readers and Writers,” Rick Evans illustrates many of the ills that can beset a student when a teacher-student relationship is skewed, either through poor grades, meaningless assignments, ambiguous requirements, or myriad other problems. Evans describes this problem by interviewing test subject Kelly, who admits that she “only writes when she is given an assignment. She writes only to the teacher, attempting to figure out what he or she ‘wants,’ those all-important ‘do’s and don’ts.’ And finally, only when Kelly receives her grade will she know if her writing has been successful” (322).

Kelly embodies the attitude many writing students display when confronted with a writing class or assignment. These students show more concern for their teachers’ requirements and “making the grade” than for the work itself. They make a decision on whether their writing is good or not based on the teacher’s final evaluation. One of the main problems many students face when dealing with writing tasks is their assessment of the competence of their teachers—whether students believe that a teacher actually has the ability to teach them. If a student is only ever taught by a teacher who shows little concern for original thought and ideas, and who allows little opportunity for the student to gain trust in him or her, chances are high that the affected student will have little faith in the teacher’s abilities. And naturally, if students do not trust that a teacher can effectively teach them to become better writers, they may come to be stuck yet again in a trap of writing hopelessness.
It is imperative for students to have a high level of belief in their teachers’ competence. But do they? In general, do students believe that a teacher can teach them to become better writers? Do they believe that teachers have the ability to do so, and do they believe that teachers actually will teach better writing skills?

Methodology

In order to become better acquainted with student beliefs and expectations, I drafted a survey asking students to answer questions regarding self-assessments, notions about giftedness, and beliefs in teacher competence. I surveyed high school students because they would still be entrenched in the required English class curriculum and most likely have strong opinions of their teachers’ abilities. I limited the survey to juniors and seniors, as they generally have a more firmly established set of beliefs as well as a stronger, more deeply rooted self-assessment.

For manageability purposes, I decided to survey students at only one local high school. The one I chose is a suburban, middle-class high school of about 1,700 students in a predominantly Caucasian community. However, I wanted to survey as many different English and writing classes within the school as I could, so as to get a varied response. Of 600 surveys distributed, the total number I collected was 329, which included students enrolled in five different English courses. Next, I numbered each survey, and responses for questions 1–19 were entered into both Minitab and Excel spreadsheets for data analysis. Once all data was entered, each of the nineteen questions was assigned to the category it best correlated to: giftedness, self-assessment, or beliefs regarding teaching.

Upon assigning each question a category, I was then able to isolate each question and determine its relevance among all categories. For questions 1–10, I used a Likert-type scale, with 1 meaning “strongly disagree,” and 6 representing “strongly agree.” For example, consider question number 1: “Good writers are born, not made” (see Appendix A). This question was assigned to the category of “Giftedness.” I determined that students who answered a “4” or greater had a higher belief in giftedness. Likewise, number 4: “Hard work and desire are all I need to become a good writer.” By removing all students who answered a “3” or less, I could determine with greater certainty who had a high level of belief in giftedness. Question number 10 also illustrates this process: “I believe I was born with the ability to write well.” I added those who answered greater than “3” to the list of students who demonstrated high levels of belief in giftedness.

These three questions—1, 4, and 10—all addressed the issue of a belief in giftedness. By isolating all students who met the criteria for these three questions, I could determine which percentage of students surveyed had higher beliefs in giftedness. I decided to follow this same formula in analyzing how these same criteria were met by Honors students versus non-Honors students. I should note that those placed in the English 1010 class were included under the Honors umbrella, since it was an advanced placement course, and held GPA and performance requirements similar to Honors classes.

This same methodology was followed in determining student self-assessments. By isolating responses to certain questions, I could determine which students, and which percentages of students, had high or low writing self-assessments.

Finally, in determining beliefs about teaching, I used questions 2 and 3 regarding whether writing can be both learned and taught, as well as questions 13–17, which focused on attitudes toward teachers. If students answered greater than a “3” to questions 2 and 3 as well as “true” to questions 13–15, it could be determined that those students had a high level of belief in teachers’ abilities. If students answered less than “4” to questions 2 and 3, and “true” to questions 16 and 17, however, it could
be determined that these students believed their teachers to be less competent. This same methodology was followed in determining differences between Honors and non-Honors students in beliefs about teaching.

Students were invited to add their thoughts and comments in question number 20, but as this information was not quantifiable, it was not included in the compilation of data. Of the 329 students who completed the survey, 193 provided comments. This group of students does not reflect the opinions of all students, but as it is a considerable number, it does allow for some interesting, albeit isolated, observation. These responses did offer some supplementary comments and insights into many of the supplied answers. Students often made remarks that followed along with and clarified the answers to many of the survey questions and will be included later.

Another important note is in regard to the standard deviation calculated in questions 1–10. Generally, standard deviation was around 1.3, proving the data to be concise and accurate.

**Findings**

Once all data was compiled and reviewed, some patterns began to emerge. I found 68% of the 329 total students surveyed had a high level of belief in giftedness. However, some of the greatest differences in responses were among Honors students versus non-Honors students in the areas of beliefs in giftedness and in self-assessments. This study was not designed to examine differences among students enrolled in various courses, but those differences were taken into account, and when compared to the group of students as a whole, Honors students’ responses varied considerably in the areas of giftedness and of self-assessment.

Despite the GPA and performance requirements that must be met for a student to be admitted into an Honors class, most of these students do not necessarily see themselves as better writers. One theory is that many Honors students expect more from themselves and are generally harder on themselves when setting personal standards of what is “good” writing. One English Honors student recorded this sentiment best by saying, “I really enjoy writing, but my writing style always feels below par. It can be frustrating not to be able to write how I feel.” Perhaps this high level of belief in giftedness among Honors students can also be related to feelings of perfectionism. Perhaps they are harder on themselves due to this belief in giftedness and the resultant consciousness of what is expected of them.

In my study, an overwhelming 76% of Honors students demonstrated high levels of belief in giftedness, contrasted to non-Honors students, 64% of whom had a high level of belief in giftedness. However, even after taking all factors into consideration, of all Honors students still nearly half, 46%, gave positive self-assessments. This is is comparison to only 23% of non-Honors students who assessed their writing positively. Thus, Honors students have a significantly higher level of belief in giftedness and are much more likely to produce positive self-assessments; conversely, non-Honors students, with their substantially lower self-assessments, expressed a lower level of belief in giftedness.

Furthermore, based on the research of Palmquist and Young, results should have “indicated that students’ level of belief in the notion of giftedness was moderately correlated with their apprehension about writing and their self-assessments of their writing ability,” for, in their studies, they found that the two logically corresponded (149). In contrast, I found that when correlations were sought between those in both Honors and non-Honors classes who had high levels of beliefs in giftedness and corresponding low self-assessments, there were only 2 in 329 who met the criteria.

These findings suggest that, while it is apparent that the majority of students surveyed do have high levels of belief in giftedness as well as negative self-assessments, the two categories aren’t nec-
essarily related. It would appear that these two issues are problematic in their own ways. However, they shouldn’t necessarily be treated as by-products of one another. My research has shown that they are individual concerns that should be treated independently.

It also became clear that among both Honors and non-Honors students alike was a positive attitude students had regarding their teachers’ abilities to teach them writing skills. 87% of all students answered “true” to the statement “My teachers have the ability to teach me to become a better writer.” Also, 84% of students answered a “4” or greater to question 2, which asked if writing could be learned. 83% of all students answered a “4” or greater to question 3: “Do you believe it [writing] can be taught?” However, once the survey comes to question number 15—“My teachers are genuinely interested in my ideas”—the numbers begin to drop off, with only 71% overall responding “true.” The next true/false statement, number 16, reads, “My teachers are more concerned with grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure than in my ideas,” to which only 46% disagreed by marking “false.” And number 17, “My writing teachers don’t give assignments that interest me,” evoked only a 52% disagreement.

While the first questions regarding teaching competence were answered most affirmatively, answers to questions regarding teaching methods showed a noticeable decline in student confidence. Students seem to believe that a teacher has the skill set, resources, and training to teach students how to become better writers, and they seem to have the overwhelming conviction that writing can in fact be taught. Despite these beliefs, students seem to be divided down the middle as to whether this teaching is effectively taking place. They seem to believe that the current teaching methods are more focused on the technical aspects of writing, rather than the subject matter, and are more concerned with rules than with students’ ideas. Almost every student who responded to question number 20, in which I invited students to share their thoughts or feelings about past writing experiences, effective and ineffective teaching methods, shared the same sentiments regarding teaching methods. Over and over, students asked for less concern with grammar and greater weight on ideas and originality. Many asked for more opportunities to write about topics of their own choosing, rather than being forced to write on a book or a topic the teacher had imposed.

This trend can potentially lead to a decline in interest and a bit of a defeatist attitude among many of the students. While many students did confess that learning the more technical aspects of writing was important, almost all who commented felt that the methods used to teach technicalities were overpowering—and even quelling—many students’ desires to write. As one student wrote, “Sometimes I feel that teachers spend too much time on correct grammar, speech and punctuation to really help us in developing our ideas and thoughts. To them, it seems like correction over-powers creativity.”

**Conclusions**

When I first met with the English teachers at the high school where I planned to leave my surveys, one of them, upon reading over the survey, began predicting student responses. He was certain most students would react negatively to almost every question. Actually, many of the student responses were in praise of current teachers. Some students named specific teachers who were teaching effectively, who valued their original ideas, and who were giving them a deeper appreciation for writing. Not coincidentally, these students were generally those who showed a high level of belief in teacher competence. Most often, those students who praised their teachers and who felt their opinions were valued by their teachers were those who, in questions 13–17 regarding beliefs about teaching, responded positively. Those students had higher levels of belief in teacher competence. One student wrote, “My
eighth and ninth grade English teacher was an English professor at U of U [University of Utah] and I really think she is the person that really got me interested in writing. You can’t teach students passion, but you can show them how to find it.”

As well over half of the total students gave themselves negative writing self-assessments, this issue is one that must be addressed. How can teachers encourage students in their writing, show an interest in their thoughts and ideas, and teach them correct technical writing tools as well? How can teachers maintain a high level of belief in teaching competence among their students and still involve the students, allowing them freedom for self-expression and individuality?

Through my findings, it is evident that most students have high levels of belief in giftedness. As writing is one subject so many students do feel very passionately about (whether positively or negatively), it is certainly one that is deserving of our most serious consideration, especially when it comes to students’ deep-rooted beliefs and self-assessments.

In looking at beliefs about teaching, beliefs in giftedness, and self-assessments, it is clear students feel very strongly about these three areas. As such, it should be the concern of all within the writing field to address them.

**APPENDIX A**

**English and Writing Survey**

Please circle the number that indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following questions, using the scale below.

1–strongly disagree; 2–disagree; 3–disagree slightly; 4–agree slightly; 5–agree; 6–strongly agree

1. Good writers are born, not made .................................................................1 2 3 4 5 6
2. Some people have said, “Writing can be learned, but it can’t be taught.”
   Do you believe it can be learned?.................................................................1 2 3 4 5 6
3. Do you believe it can be taught?.................................................................1 2 3 4 5 6
4. Hard work and desire are all I need to become a good writer ................1 2 3 4 5 6
5. I am a good writer ......................................................................................1 2 3 4 5 6
6. No matter how hard I try, I will never be a good writer ........................1 2 3 4 5 6
7. I avoid writing ............................................................................................1 2 3 4 5 6
8. I enjoy writing ............................................................................................1 2 3 4 5 6
9. I’m no good at writing ..............................................................................1 2 3 4 5 6
10. I believe I was born with the ability to write well .................................1 2 3 4 5 6

Thinking about previous English and writing classes as well as the one(s) you are currently taking, please circle **true** or **false** to the following statements.

11. I generally receive good grades on writing pieces I turn in .................true false
12. Generally, I feel my grades are an accurate reflection of my writing ability........true false
13. I feel my teachers grade my work fairly and accurately .....................true false
14. My teachers have the ability to teach me to become a better writer ........true false
15. My teachers are genuinely interested in my ideas ................................true false
16. My teachers are more concerned with grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure than in my ideas .................................................................true false
17. My writing teachers don’t give assignments that interest me ........................................true false
18. What grade are you in?
19. What English and/or writing class(es) are you currently taking?
20. Use any of the space on the back of this page to write any thoughts or feelings you might have about past writing experiences, and/or suggestions for teachers who may wish to improve your writing experiences. What teaching methods might be effective? What current teaching methods are not effective?

Please note that your answers are confidential.

Works Cited