Teachers' Accounts of Their Perceptions and Practices of Providing Written Feedback to Nursing Students on Their Assignments

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Abstract

Written feedback can facilitate students' learning in several ways. However, the teachers' practices of written feedback may be affected by various factors. This study aimed to explore the nurse teachers' accounts of their perceptions and practices of providing written feedback.

A descriptive exploratory design was employed in the study. A purposive sample of 12 teachers from nursing institutions in Karachi, Pakistan, participated in the study. Using a semi-structured guide, in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants, between January-September, 2013. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim and were manually content analyzed.

The analysis of findings led to three sections: teachers' conceptions about written feedback, teachers' practices of providing written feedback, and factors that affect the teachers' practices of providing written feedback to their students. The findings indicated that although the teachers realize the importance of written feedback and its impact on students' learning, several factors, including teachers' competence and commitment, students' receptivity, and contextual barriers, affected their practices.

To actualize the potential power of teachers' written feedback in students' learning, both teachers and institutional administrators need to realize the importance of written feedback. Moreover, concerted efforts including teachers' development and policies are required to overcome the factors that negatively influence the practices of written feedback.

Keywords: Teachers' written feedback, Teachers' comments, Students' assignments, Written feedback barriers

1. Background

It is well recognized that teachers' written feedback plays an essential role in students' learning (Spiller, 2009). Written feedback on their assignments is important as, it can promote students' critical thinking, reflective abilities and writing skills (Dekker, Schönrock-Adema, Snoek, Molen, & Cohen-Schotanus, 2013; Ghazal, Gul, Hanzala, Jessop, & Tharani, 2014; Luthy et al., 2009). However, if no feedback is given, students assume that they are doing perfectly well and do not need to improve (Carless, 2006; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; McKimm, 2009). Hence, it is one of the important responsibilities of teachers to provide effective feedback to their students. However, discrepancies are found between teachers' written feedback practices and the recommended principles of feedback (Lee, 2009a).

This study aimed to explore the nurse teachers' accounts of their perceptions and practices of providing written feedback. In addition, factors that influence the teachers' practices of providing written feedback were also investigated. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the nurse teachers' conceptions of written feedback?

2. What are the nurse teachers' practices of providing written feedback on students' assignments?

3. What are the factors perceived by nurse teachers as affecting their practices of providing written feedback?

2. Literature Review

Written feedback is effective when it is adequate, expressed in a positive tone, individualized (Dekker et al., 2013; Ghazal et al., 2014; Polus & Mahony, 2008; Rae & Cochrane, 2008), understandable, received on time, and focused on

learning not grading (Ghazal et al., 2014; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Moreover, effective feedback is balanced focusing on both the strengths and weaknesses of the students' writings (Ghazal et al., 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Weaver, 2006). Similarly, feedback that contains questions to stimulate students' thinking is also considered effective by students (Ghazal et al., 2014). Furthermore, written feedback is effective when consistent with the assigned marks or grades on the assignments (Ghazal et al., 2014; Polus & Mahony, 2008). Despite its paramount significance, the practices and perspectives of written feedback are not uniform among teachers (Glover & Brown, 2006; Walker, 2007), as they are influenced by several factors.

The teachers' values and beliefs can influence their practices of written feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Lee, 2009b) as their beliefs are reflected in the feedback they provide to their students (Lee, 2009b). For example, Hyland and Hyland (2001), in their study on two teachers about their motivation for using mitigation in their feedback, identified that teachers believed in praise as more effective than criticism, and their belief influenced their practice of written feedback as they mitigated their criticisms to suggestions.

Besides teachers' personal factors, the students' interest and motivation towards learning can also influence the teachers' motivation for providing written feedback. Through a questionnaire sent to the teachers and a focus group discussion with six students in the University of Wolverhampton in United Kingdom, Winter and Dye (2004) found out that students valued their grades not the feedback and showed low motivation and enthusiasm for learning through feedback. Consequently, when the teachers felt that their feedback was not utilized, they lost interest in providing feedback. In addition to teachers and students related factors, contextual factors such as teachers' workload, institutional policy about feedback, and the teacher and student relationship (Duncan, 2007; Goldstein, 2004) may also influence the practices of teachers' written feedback.

3. Research Methods

A qualitative descriptive exploratory study design was used in this study. A descriptive exploratory design is appropriate when an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon is desired (Polit& Beck, 2012; Sandelowski, 2000).

The population of the study comprised of nurse teachers who were teaching in a nursing degree program in Karachi, Pakistan. Teachers who have had a minimum of one year teaching experience; had the practice of returning students' written assignment to them; and were willing to provide written consent, participated in this study.

A purposive sample of twelve nurse teachers helped to reach data saturation. Data saturation is achieved when specific themes or behaviors are noted repeatedly and a general picture of information is reaffirmed (Bowen, 2008; Morse & Richards, 2002). Efforts were made to recruit a diverse group of participants to ensure varied perceptions on the phenomenon.

Face to face in depth interviews were conducted to collect data. In addition, demographic information of the population was also obtained from the participants. Once a participant agreed to participate, the date and time of interviews were planned according to their availability. The interview settings were also planned according to its feasibility for the participants, and a venue with least interruptions was utilized for the interviews.

A self-developed, semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct the interviews; the interview guide was developed based on relevant literature review. The guide had six broad questions and they were used with planned and unplanned probes. Field notes (Polit& Beck, 2012) were taken during the interviews. The interview guide was pilot tested on nurse teacher and some probes were added where necessary. The interviews were conducted in English or Urdu based on the participants' choice. The interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participants and were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. In case of any difficulty in understanding the participants' response, they were revisited for 10-15 minutes for follow up interviews.

In accordance with the tradition of qualitative research (Morse & Richard, 2002), data analysis was started simultaneously with data collection. Data were analyzed as explained by Morse and Richard (2002). Content from the transcripts was organized according to the broad interview questions. Following this, the text for each question was read and re-read, for coding whether latent or manifest (Morse & Richard, 2002). Accordingly, the important words, phrases, and sentences were highlighted for coding. Next, all the relevant codes were put together with their frequencies. Based on the meaning of concepts in the identified code and the connectivity and relevancy between codes, categories and subcategories were developed.

As reflected in the above information, Lincoln and Guba's criteria (1985) of trustworthiness (Polit& Beck, 2012), including credibility, conformability and transferability were followed to maintain rigor in the study.

Before data collection, approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of the Aga Khan University

(AKU-ERC), Karachi, Pakistan. In addition, permission was sought from the head of nursing institutions to access their faculty members for data collection. An informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. The information letter given to each participant included the study purpose, risks and benefits, and the participant's right to refuse or withdraw. The participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality of data during and after the research study. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used for participants.

4. Study Findings

As shown in Table 1, out of 12 nurse teachers, six were male while six were female. Except for one, the rest of the participants had either a Masters or Bachelor degree in Nursing. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from one and a half to 23 years while the median years of experience was 5.9. The participants belonged to five nursing institutions in Karachi; of that, nine participants were teaching in private nursing institutions while three were teaching in public nursing institutions. Moreover, six participants were teaching in two institutions. With regards to their preparation for giving written feedback, only one participant had attended a course in which the topic of feedback was addressed to some extent, but the rest of the participants had no formal training or education on this topic.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study participants

Variables	n (12)	%
Gender		
Female	6	(50)
Male	6	(50)
Teaching Experiences		
1-3 years	4	(33.33)
3-8 years	6	(50)
More than 8 years	2	(16.66)
Educational Background		
Doctor of philosophy in nursing	1	(8.33)
Masters of science in nursing	5	(41.66)
Bachelors of science in nursing	6	(50)

4.1 Findings

The analyzed data from the participants' transcriptions were organized into 3 sections: that are teachers' conceptions of written feedback; teachers' practices of providing written feedback to students; factors that affect the teachers' practices of providing written feedback. This organization was based on the six broad interview questions. Each section consists of responses to one or more than one interview questions. Likewise, each section has one or more categories. Sections, categories, and sub-categories are illustrated in table 2. Findings pertinent to each section are discussed below and are supported with excerpts from the participants' interviews. To improve readability, excerpts were corrected for grammatical errors, without changing the intent of the participants' responses. In the following sections, the term "nurse teachers", "teachers", "participants", and "informants" are interchangeably used, which refer to the nurse teachers who participated in this study.

Table 2. Sections, categories, and sub-categories of data on teachers' perceptions

Sections	Categories	Sub-categories
Conception of Written Feedback	Description Significance Functions	
Practices of Written Feedback	Focus of written feedback Tone of written feedback Clarity of written feedback	Content, form, and format Positive and negative
Factors influencing teachers' practices	Teachers' competence and commitment	Command on the subject Knowledge and skills of written feedback
	Teachers' views of Students' receptivity	Students' interest and motivation Students' sensitivity
	Contextual factors	Institutional policies and expectations Teachers' workload Lack of conducive work environment Intimidation from students and administrators

Teachers' conception of written feedback. Data in this section led to three categories that are:descriptions or definition of feedback, its significance, and functions.

Description of written feedback. Teachers described written feedback in various ways. Several participants considered written feedback as written comments on the students' work, acknowledging their strengths, identifying gaps in students' writings, and giving guidance for improvement. Sana articulated that feedback is *"something that I would like the student to use for further improvement… [therefore] I would raise questions…what modifications we can do, how the modification will bring a difference"*. However, a few teachers thought of feedback as assessment of students' performance and allocation of grades. For instance, Hasan stated, *"I think feedback is the assessment of knowledge which the students have gained in their courses"*. Likewise, Khan verbalized that feedback is *"allocation of marks to the students' work"*.

Significance of written feedback. Almost all the participants acknowledged the importance of written feedback for furthering the student learning. According to them, giving feedback was important as it help students to know if they were on the right track or not and to give ideas about how to improve their subsequent academic work and learning. As Anil said, *"Feedback has a major role in students' learning. If students don't know how they are doing, whether they are on the right track or not, then they cannot improve themselves"*. Similarly, Hasan expounded:

If you don't give feedback to the students, then you are not preparing them for future learning and you are not improving or enhancing their learning and you are letting them continue with their weaknesses. When feedback is given to students regarding their weakness, then they may correct their mistakes.

Several participants viewed written feedback as being helpful in learning when it was practiced in concurrence with verbal feedback, in which students have the opportunity to clarify the feedback. As Fajar posited, *"I believe that both written and verbal feedback should be used in combination. I am not very much in favor of written feedback alone"*. However, a few of the participants thought that the onus for verbal discussion should lie with the students. As Sana said, *"Because they are adults and for me it was my job to give written feedback, students might come for discussion or they*

might have another task more important to them".

Functions of written feedback. For the majority of the participants, feedback served a dual purpose that is to acknowledge the students strengths and to diagnose their learning needs. As Dewa responded, that feedback helps students to reflect on the *"right and wrong points in their assignments"*. Some participants were of the view that feedback helps the students to realize their mistakes and to improve themselves in the future; in this way, feedback worked as a feed forward for the students. Written feedback was also seen as a resource guide that could be referred to when needed. As Sana stated, *"Students can go back to it, re-read the feedback and can bring a change in their writings accordingly"*. However, a few participants also posited that one of the important functions of written feedback was to justify the marks or grades given to the students on their assignments. As reflected in this quote, *"Suppose if we give the student 70% marks…why the student was not given 90 or 95%, so there is a need to explain the reasons"* (Amjad). Likewise, Murad also expressed, "*you have to justify to them* [students] *that why you have given these marks to them"*.

Teachers' practices of written feedback. Teachers appeared to have varied practices of providing written feedback to their students. Their comments reflected variation in their focus and tone of written feedback that they provide to the students on their written assignments.

Focus of written feedback. Most of the participants' responses showed that they probably concentrate on a number of areas, including content, form, and format of the assignment. In addition, some of the teachers gave importance to the students' thinking and conceptual clarity in their assignments. Moreover, a few teachers also mentioned that they are cautious about the sources of ideas that students might have plagiarized. However, they varied in their preferences; for instance, some focused more on content while others focused more on form of the students' writings.

Most of the teachers thought that content should be given priority while providing feedback on written assignments. As Anil stated, *"language, writing skills, they are important, but not as much as the content is important…content must be your priority"*. However, several teachers reported that they also focus on students' own ideas and thinking. As Dewa reflected in the following quote:

Every student can easily search for the bookish knowledge and write it...but only a few students would write according to their own thoughts and ideas; they are able to relate their personal experiences with a particular topic.

Similarly, Sana also expected her students "*to integrate personal thinking in their assignments"*. Besides content, several teachers preferred to focus on the form of the students' writings. For instance, Dewa shared that besides the content, she mostly commented on the *"sentence structure, the grammar, composing of sentences and punctuation"*. Similarly, Fajar reflected, *"besides matching the assignment with the given criterion, I personally try to look at the language, grammar, sentence formation, and APA"*. However, a few teachers considered feedback on the English language as not necessary or not their remit. For instance, Murad said*, "I don't see the English of the students! To me language is not important, because this is not an English assignment"*. However, others felt that it would be more appropriate if the language experts provided feedback on the language related issues while nurse teachers look at the content.

Another area considered important by several participants was the format of the students' assignments. Format was referred to as organization of the paper and the flow of ideas in the assignment. As Hasan verbalized, *"First there should be the introduction, then there should be supporting sentences, and then body. At the end, there should be a conclusion"*. Moreover, nearly half of the participants expressed that plagiarism is a common issue in the students' assignments which need teachers' attention. As Hina stated, "*Some students copy paste the ideas from the internet and then write them down in their assignment as if they were their own"*. Likewise, Sana highlighted that "*students' tend to take others' ideas without reference",* which needs the teacher's attention while checking the assignments.

Tone of the written feedback. With regard to the tone of the written feedback, almost all the participants shared that they used appreciating and encouraging words whenever the students performed according to their expectations. However, their tone varied while providing feedback on gaps in students' assignments.

Anil reported that when the students did well, he wrote comments in an, "*encouraging tone for example, 'this is very good, very fine, you have done it in a good way'. And if a student has done very well, then I would say 'Excellent'.* Some teachers also expressed that they made intentional efforts to make their feedback positive. For example, Murad shared that he used a model for maintaining a balance in the tone of his written feedback. He coined this model as PCI, which means praise, confusion, and improvement. While describing his model, he expressed: "*I believe that first we should highlight the positive points in the assignment, then identify those points which are confusing…and then provide suggestions for areas of improvement"*.

Some teachers shared that they pointed out gaps in students' writings candidly, while others thought that they mitigate their comments on gaps. For instance, Hasan stated, *"I give comments like…you need to support your thinking, you need content information…you have not focused on this or that"*. Likewise, Khan also shared his experience: *"Sometimes I tell the students that you have totally copied from the net, and I don't see your own effort in this assignment"*. However, many teachers did not favor the direct stating of gaps in the assignments; they mitigated the tone of their written comments. For instance, Murad shared his experience:

It [feedback] *shouldn't be so direct! It should be in an indirect way…if I have to indicate some areas of improvement, I say that your thoughts are very good, but you need to improve or elaborate in this area....I never blame the student directly.*

Clarity of the written feedback. Many teachers viewed clarity of written comments as a crucial aspect of their feedback practices. Reflecting upon the importance of clarity in feedback, Salim felt, *"it is very important to be clear in your feedback"*. Likewise, Fajar explained:

Once students are clear about their teachers' feedback, [if] *they know what they have to do in the next assignment, then they are willing to work on it. But if they are unclear, then they leave it and they don't use that feedback.*

Although teachers appreciated the importance of clarity in their feedback, some of their responses revealed that sometimes students may not be able to follow the teachers' written feedback unless given the opportunity to discuss it with the teacher. As reflected in Dewa's statement, *"Mostly, the students who want to learn from feedback, come to us and say, 'Miss what do we need to improve', so then we discuss* [feedback] *with them"*.

Factors that influence the teachers' practices of written feedback. The teachers' narratives showed that their practices were influenced by different factors that could be categorized as: the teachers' competence and commitment, students' receptivity, and contextual factors. These categories and their respective sub-categories are illustrated in table 2.

Teachers' competence and commitment. All the participants considered that the teachers' competence and commitment was important for giving written feedback. Competence was referred to the teachers' command on the subject of the assignments that they checked as well as their knowledge and skills of giving feedback. Some teachers also highlighted the importance of the mode through which written feedback was shared with the students. As Huma explained, *"writing feedback is a skill, and faculty needs to learn this skill, as to how to write the feedback, and also how to deliver it"*. Commenting on teachers' knowledge about the subject of assignment, Fajar believed that *"if teachers do not have a good grasp of the subject; obviously their feedback could not be very effective"*.

Many teachers thought that, besides training, competence to give feedback comes from personal experiences including the individual experience of having feedback as a learner in the past. As Salim posited:

How the teacher has been trained, what are his experiences, how his schooling was done, how his teachers were giving him feedback, all that influences his practice of giving feedback to his students.

Almost all the teachers expressed that they gave written feedback based on their own commitment to their profession as their institutions had no explicit expectations or policy regarding written feedback. As Anil verbalized:

There is no policy about written feedback in our teaching learning system; the teacher is free to give or not to give feedback; providing feedback is a personal and individual matter of the teacher.

Teacher's Views of Students' receptivity. Based on their explicit as well as implicit responses, the participants referred to various characteristics of the students that might influence their practices of written feedback. These characteristics included: students' interests and motivation to learn from written feedback and their sensitivity towards their teachers' written feedback. Many teachers shared that students showed less interest and motivation towards their written feedback, and in turn the teachers' interest and enthusiasm in providing written feedback is influenced. As Dewa asserted: *"some of the students never bother or they never try to implement our feedback…they are never interested in implementing feedback, which makes us think that what is the use of giving them feedback?"*. A few teachers also noted that some students had a more sensitive nature than others and that influenced the teachers' practices of feedback. Reflecting on his experience with some of the students who showed sensitivity to his written feedback, Khan said: *"I know that whatever I would tell to these students, they would really mind it a lot, so it's good not to give them feedback"*.

Contextual factors. The participants identified various contextual factors that influenced their practices of written feedback. These factors were sub-categorized as institutional policies and expectation about written feedback, teachers' workload, lack of conducive work environment, and intimidations from students and administrators.

Institutional policies and expectations. Almost all the participants shared that the institutions where they taught had no policy or guidelines about the provision of written feedback and that they had limited time to provide written feedback. Nearly half of the participants thought that absence of policy or guidelines was a major reason of variations in their practices of written feedback. They confessed that although some of their colleagues may write some short comments at the end of the assignment, others do not provide any written feedback to their students, but "*just put tick mark and give the assignment back to the student"*, said Hina. Explaining the varied practices of written feedback, Nadia responded: "*Absence of clear guidelines or policy for written feedback at the institutional level leads to discrepancy in the practices of the faculty"*. Moreover, most of them thought that the administration paid least attention to the requirements of written feedback, which in their view, affected their practices of providing written feedback.

Teachers' workload. Some of the teachers explained that due to lack of expectations about written feedback at the institutional level, the time required for feedback was not taken into account while planning their teaching assignments. For instance, Murad stated:

We have been assigned 4 to 5 subjects to teach. In such a case, it becomes difficult to have time for written feedback, as we have to fulfill the basic responsibilities of class room teaching.

Likewise, Hasan commented, "*Sometimes the assignments are just lying there in our cupboard and we don't get time to give feedback on them"*. Fajar explained that*, "people are not intentionally avoiding or compromising their quality of feedback; it's just because they don't have time"*.

Lack of conducive work environment. Nearly half of the teachers revealed that their work environment was not conducive for checking assignments with the required concentration, which is necessary for effective evaluation of students' work and giving accurate written feedback. As Salim elaborated:

We have a common faculty room, where 10 faculty members may work at a time and if some of them are chitchatting, then you cannot concentrate on the assignment because you are distracted.

Intimidations from students and administrators. Several teachers pointed out to the real or potential intimidations that they were faced with and that influenced their practices of students' assessment and feedback. According to teachers, it was important to align the marks and remarks, therefore the intimidations encountered for giving good marks to students, influence the nature and amount of their feedback. A number of teachers reflected on several behaviors of students that could, inadvertently, affect the teachers' practices of providing written feedback. These behaviors were identified as fear of retribution from students, including disrespectful behavior towards teachers or/and poor evaluation of the teachers. As Hasan commented:

A teacher also, definitely has to save the job. As you are working in a private institution, and if you do strict marking, the students would fail. In such a case, the students would say, "This teacher was not teaching us nicely".

Some teachers also shared that a few students in the class sometimes had political affiliations and that posed a threat to them and made them give the students good grades. For instance, Salim explained:

As you [the teacher] *are dealing with adult students, who are usually associated with some of the political parties or some higher authorities, so you have to consider such students and you have to give them good marks. Sometimes, it's a threat, sometimes it's a favor, based on the relationships.*

Likewise, Anil stated, "*If a student is a very influential person or he/she is a problem creator for the teacher, then you* [teacher] *are affected by these factors psychologically"*. Some teachers also felt that students take revenge when they fill the evaluation of their teachers.

Several teachers pointed out to the impact of students' relationship with the teacher in marking assignments and giving written feedback. Teachers shared their experiences that if the students had a rude behavior or did not show respect towards teachers, then that could influence the teachers' mood while providing written feedback. For instance, explaining his view Khan said:

Even if a student has produced a good assignment but his/her relationship with the teacher is not good, then it can definitely influence the teachers' feedback, because the teacher's way of giving feedback is unintentionally influenced.

Two of the participants were of the view that although the relationship between a student and teacher must be friendly and professional, it must never be turned into friendship. Because when a student and teacher become informal; it could affect learning as the student may become non serious in following his/her teacher's written feedback.

Besides the students, teachers also reported intimidations experienced from their administrators. For instance, Salim stated: "*In private schools owned by individuals, the owners want the students to obtain good GPA, so that their*

institutions can have a good name [reputation] in the market…".Therefore, administrators of such institution advised the teachers for lenient marking. As a result, *as* Hasan explained, "*the marks which the teachers give to the students are not fair* [deserved]*"*.

5. Discussion

Although most of the participants in this study provided accurate description of written feedback as noted in the literature (Ghazal et al., 2014; Lee, 2009b; Ridder, Stokking, McGaghie, & Cate, 2008; Walker, 2007; Winter & Dye, 2004), a few of them considered the allocation of marks as written feedback.

 In line with the existing literature (Carless, 2006; Ghazal et al., 2014; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05; Magno & Amarles, 2011; McKimm, 2009;Orrell, 2006; Parboteeah & Anwar, 2009; Spiller, 2009), the participants in this study also acknowledged the importance of written feedback in students' learning. Moreover, they emphasized that impact of feedback could enhanced when accompanied with verbal discussion with students as noted earlier in studies of students (Khowaja & Gul, 2014; Ghazal et al., 2014) and teachers (Nicol, 2010). However, due to certain factors (discussed later) teachers were unable to actualize this belief in practice.

Based on teachers' reflections, students took the feedback positively when it was mitigated or had minimum identification of gaps in their assignments. Moreover, students reacted negatively if they were provided criticizing or commanding feedback and/or if each mistake in their assignments was highlighted. Similar findings were identified by another study from Pakistani context (Ghazal et al., 2014).

Unlike the findings of Lee (2008), which identified that 94.1% of the teachers focused on "form" of the students' writings, teachers in the current study reported "content" as the preferred focused for giving feedback. Lee maintained that commenting on form is important to improve the students' writing skills, especially in a context where English is not the primary language. However, this finding is in line with the findings of several studies, (Ghazal et al., 2014; Glover & Brown, 2006; Khowaja & Gul, 2014; Magno & Amarles, 2011). Interestingly, a few teachers in the current study refuted the idea of focusing on form. They provided reasonable suggestions that the assignments could be dually marked, by the subject as well the language teacher.

The participants also pointed out that the issue of plagiarism needed to be paid attention to while checking the students' assignments, which was also acknowledged by students in a study conducted in a similar context (Khowaja, Gul, Lakhani, Rizvi, & Saleem, 2014).
Goldstein (2004) acknowledged that plagiarism might not be due to lack of seriousness towards assignments, but students' inability to paraphrase others' ideas in their own words. This seems to be relevant in a context where English is not the first language. Although not highlighted in the literature, another important aspect related to feedback shared by the participants is to provide feedback on students' own thinking and conceptual clarity in their assignments.

The participants claim that they needed concerted efforts to make feedback positive was found concurrent with previous studies' findings (Ghazal et al., 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). However, the examples of feedback tone they shared in interviews did not project their claim. Such mismatch between teachers' beliefs and practices was also found by Lee (2009b) and Ghazal et al. (2014) but they did not give any reasons for such mismatch. In my view, this mismatch could be due to several reasons. For one, the teachers' frustration with too many and/or repeated mistakes of the students in their assignments can unintentionally bring a negative tone in their written feedback. Moreover, the mismatch could also be due to the teachers' own limited command over the language to clearly express their thoughts in the form of written feedback. Above all, one of the reasons for the mismatch could be the teachers' lack of knowledge and skills needed for provision of written feedback.

Although a study in the Pakistani context (Ghazal et al., 2014) has validated the students' views about the importance of reflective questions in written feedback, only one participant in the current study shared that she posed reflective questions while providing feedback.

Teachers considered that written feedback must be given with clarity to be understandable for students. They recommended two important steps for clarity in written feedback. First, it should identify the areas for improvement in students' assignments and, second, provide guidance or strategies on how to improve their work. Most of the teachers were consistent in mentioning these recommendations, however due to several complexities (discussed later in this section) they could not follow the recommended practices of written feedback.

Several factors that did not facilitate good practices of written feedback were identified in the current study; these were also found in different studies in bits and pieces (Ghazal et al., 2014; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05; Glover & Brown, 2006; Goldstein, 2004; Khowaja et al., 2014; Lee, 2008). However, interestingly, in this study, some more factors were revealed from the teachers' perspectives, which might be specific to the context of Pakistan, or they might be prevailing

in other contexts but might not have been explored. These peculiar factors included teachers' commitment with their profession; institutional policies and expectations; influence of students and owners of the institutions; and environment in which the written feedback was provided.

The findings of this study affirmed that institutions lacked policies on the provision of written feedback to students (Khowaja & Gul, 2014). Moreover, the participants in this study explained as to how this lack of policies and guidelines led to variations in their practices of written feedback. The participants also stated that written feedback not being an institutional expectation increased their workload as it was not considered in their task allocation. That increased workload, besides other complexities, led to delayed feedback: a well-known reason for decreased effectiveness of written feedback (Brown & Glower, 2007; Ghazal et al., 2014; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05; Khowaja et al., 2011; Polus & Mahony, 2008). In addition, workload was also amplified due to the fact that nearly half of the participants worked in more than one institution, as inquired in the demographic characteristics.

A crucial issue that affected the teachers' practices of written feedback was associated with the students' receptivity of written feedback. Concurring with previous studies (Ghazal et al., 2014; Lee, 2008; Winter & Dye, 2004), teachers in the current study revealed that students gave preference to marks than remarks of their teachers. For handling this issue of students giving preference to marks, Lee (2008) suggests that teachers should collect the assignments in two drafts.

Based on their observation, teachers in the current study explained that if the students saw more areas of improvement pointed out in their assignments, they showed stronger negative reactions than others. Young (2000) had identified that such differences could be due to the differences in the level of students' self-esteem. In addition, as highlighted by Quinton and Smallbone (2010) and Winter and Dye (2004), some of the students cannot internalize the written feedback and so they cannot follow it; participants in this study also asserted that all students did not possess the same capabilities and this fact needed to be considered while providing them feedback.

Another point of concern highlighted by the study was that some teachers did not have an appropriate place to do their work without interruptions. However, what was more worrying was that teachers faced overt and covert pressures that influenced their assessment of the students' work and, hence, affected their ability for providing written feedback. These findings might be specific to the context of Pakistan or they might also be prevailing in other contexts yet have not been explored. In light of all these factors that affected teachers' practices of written feedback, teachers in the current study reflected that teachers' honesty and commitment to their profession was highly important for them to continue with persistence in their practices of written feedback.

Teachers shared that they face frequent intimidations from different sources especially from students and the owner of their institutions. Such intimidations were to give good score to the students. In other words, if the teachers are intimidated to provide good marks or grades that are not reflective of the students' work, teachers may refrain from writing any comments; otherwise, their remarks would not be aligned with the inflated marks.

6. Strengths and Limitations

The current study produced base-line data for future research on written feedback. This study was the first of its kind which explored the nurse teachers' perceptions of written feedback in the Pakistani context.

Since eleven of the twelve participants in this study had no formal preparation for provision of written feedback, it might have influenced their responses to the inquiry. The first author (SI) who conducted the interviews, also felt that the participants were struggling with their responses. However, this study provided them an opportunity to reflect on their practices of written feedback. For instance one participant expressed, "*you just helped me realize that the question mark* [?] *that I put on the students' assignment might not give a clear message to students*".

This study was limited to the teachers' self-reporting, triangulation of the teachers' self-report via interview with the analysis of their marked paper would have strengthened the study because in self-reporting participants may direct their responses in a way that presents them to be as proficient as possible (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002),.

7. Conclusion

The study focused on teachers' perceptions and practices of providing written feedback to students on their written assignments. Although all the participants believed in the importance of written feedback and had some knowledge about its implications on students learning, their practices, in most cases, were discordant with their beliefs and knowledge about the written feedback. Moreover, variations were noted in their beliefs and practices of written feedback. The participants identified several personal and contextual factors that affected their practices, and which explain the observed discordance as well variations in their practices. This study revealed that in addition to teachers' competence and commitment for effective practices of feedback, institutional commitment and culture is necessary to

harness the full potential of written feedback in students learning.

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