



# Write On!

## with the Writing Skills Development Project

Volume 2, Issue 1  
Spring 2009

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING  
OF THE CAROLINA INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

### The Writing Project— A Little History



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Welcome to the Spring 2009 Edition of Write On! Thank you to all of the families for your continued participation in the Writing Skills Development Project. It has been our pleasure and a privilege to get to know your children.

Thank you, also, to the teachers and principals in the elementary schools. You have helped to make the assessment and intervention scheduling so successful. Our biggest Thank You continues to be extended to the children, who have been enthusiastic participants in the process!

All of the students have participated in two yearly assessments, and we have been able to take a look at some of the information from the first yearly assessment. One question that has come up frequently is *what have we learned so far?* In this issue, we are excited to be able to share some of the preliminary findings from the first year's assessments. We also will discuss some of the models that have been developed to describe writing development, and how the models are reflected in the assessment.

Several models have been proposed to describe the factors that are involved in written expression. In 1986, J.R. Hayes and L.S. Flowers proposed a model to explain the development of writing skills. The model, which was subsequently revised by Hayes in 1996 and 2000, generally has been one of the most influential in the broad field of written expression. This model described three components – 1) task environment, which is the motivation for writing and the written product, 2) long-term memory, including knowledge of the topic and the audience, as well as the type of writing product (letter, essay, etc.), and 3) working memory, which includes planning, translating/writing, and reviewing/editing. There has been very little work on this model devoted to early elementary school children. It is unclear how the components of the model interact and how the subcomponents of these major components change and interact over time, particularly for young children at risk for writing problems.

A more recent model of written expression, developed in 2003 by Dr. Virginia Berninger and colleagues, is based on research with early elementary school students at the University of Washington and University of Maryland.

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The project was funded by the  
Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of  
Education, through Grant R305H060042,  
MCHB (#T73MC00030), and ADD (#90DD0545).



In the fall 2008 and early winter 2009, we completed the second assessment of the students who enrolled in the fall of 2007. There are 104 students in this group representing all of the elementary schools in Orange County, as well as elementary schools in Alamance and Person County. Scoring of the assessment measures were completed this April, and summaries will be sent beginning in May. The third grade intervention also began in the fall. Thirty-two third grade students participated in 24 writing lessons over a twelve-week period.



This spring, we are completing the third yearly assessments with the students who joined the study in the first year. In addition, 30 second grade students are participating in the writing intervention. Most of the groups will be completing the 24 lessons by the middle of May. We will complete the scoring of the spring assessments early this summer and hope to send out the assessment summaries at that time.

## Jaelyn Zins—Graduate Student



JACKIE IS ENJOYING HER TIME AT NEW HOPE ELEMENTARY AND CAMERON PARK

Jackie Zins earned her bachelor's degree in psychology and mass communication studies from Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, IN. After graduating, she joined Teach For America, moving to North Carolina to teach students from low-income communities in the eastern part of the state. Jackie taught Language Arts to students

with special needs in grades 6 through 8. She is currently enrolled at UNC-Chapel Hill pursuing her master's degree in School Psychology. She also serves as the Education Trainee at the Center for Development and Learning. This is her first year working with the writing project.

Jackie has a special interest in working with children

with neuro-developmental disabilities and children from urban, low-income backgrounds. Through teaching, Jackie became interested in Positive Behavior Support programs, teaching reading to students with learning difficulties, and teacher responsibility for the classroom experience. In her spare time she enjoys reading for pleasure, watching reality television shows, and working out.

## IES Conference Scheduled for June 10-12, 2009

This June, Steve and Kathleen will be in Washington, DC at the annual IES Conference to present preliminary findings for the use of direct instruction in written language using the Process Assessment of the Learner (PAL) Intervention Program via a Tier-II Response-to-Instruction (RTI) model. IES is the Department of Education funding source for the Writing Project.

Participants included 32 second grade students who were identified at the end of their first grade year as "at-risk" by falling below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the WIAT-II Written Expression Subtest. The group was comprised of 62.5% male and 59.4% Caucasian. All students were randomized, by school, to treatment versus non-treatment groups. The intervention comprised 24 lessons of approximately 20-25 minutes in duration, and involved direct instruction in handwriting, alphabetic principle, spelling, and composition over 12 weeks during the spring. The lessons were conducted in small groups of 4 to 6 students. About 94% fidelity was achieved across interventionists with most students attending over 75% of the sessions.

Using a pretest-post test design, nearly 60% of the students made positive gains over the 24 sessions, with almost 79% showing WIAT-II Written Expression post test scores that were above the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile. A simple one-tailed t-test revealed a significant difference between pretest and post test WIAT-II Written Expression standard scores,  $t(28) = 2.47, p < .02$ , with a moderate effect size being present (Cohen's  $d = .41$ ). These preliminary findings are encouraging and indicate that direct instruction in written expression using the PAL lesson plans via a Tier-II RTI Model can improve writing in at-risk second grade students.





**JENNY IS KEEPING BUSY  
WITH THE STUDENTS AT  
GRADY BROWN**

## Jennifer Hiemenz—Psychologist

Jenny is the Clinic Director and a pediatric neuropsychologist at the CDL. She is interested in the early development of pre-academic skills in toddlers and preschool children, as well as in the impact of nutritional status on neurocognitive development.

Jenny graduated from the University of Notre Dame with a degree in psychology and a minor in theology. She completed her master's and doctoral degrees in School Psychology at the University of Georgia, and completed her internship at the Medical College of Georgia. After completing her graduate program, she was a postdoctoral fellow in pediatric neuropsychology and developmental disabilities at the Kennedy Krieger Institute, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

Jenny lives in Durham with her husband, four children, and their dog. She enjoys cooking southern food, riding her bike, being a Cub Scout and Girl Scout leader, and knitting in her free time.

A publication of the Center for Development and Learning  
Of the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities



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**The research reported here was supported by the  
Institute of Education Sciences, U.S.  
Department of Education, through Grant  
#R305H060042 to The University of North  
Carolina at Chapel Hill. The opinions  
expressed are those of the authors and do not  
represent views of the Institute or the U.S.**

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The model is called the Not-So-Simple View of Writing. This model has three major components: 1) transcription, which includes handwriting/letter production and spelling/word production; 2) planning, monitoring, and revising, which are grouped together as executive function skills; and 3) text generation or the process of writing a word, or a sentence, or a composition. This third component is the main writing goal for the beginning writer. The Not-So-Simple View of Writing model suggests that different areas of development - neuropsychological, language or linguistic, and memory and attention skills – may be present throughout the development of the writing process, but that each area exerts more (or less) influence at different points in the developmental process. The assessment and intervention model used for the Writing Project are based on the Not-So-Simple View of Writing Model, particularly due to its emphasis on developmental achievement of specific skills at specific times and its evidence-based connection between assessment and intervention.

The longitudinal design of the project (following students over four years) helps us to study the changing relationships among various writing components of the Not-So-Simple View of Writing. The assessment in year 1 established a baseline of skills for the students. Then each year, we measure the change in skills from the first year.