

Write On!

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The Current Study: Progress

Lara-Jeane Costa, Ph. D.
Project Director

Our progress

In August of 2013, we began the second year of our study into written expression in middle school students. We screened over 425 sixth graders and 192 were eligible for the study from the three middle schools in Orange County. Forty-two students and their parents agreed to participate. The participants were given an assessment that evaluated their reading ability, writing ability, and other skills such as memory. We also did follow-up assessments with the 38 seventh graders who joined the study in 2012.



Beginning in February 2014, the students then participated in a small-group writing program that met twice a week for 30 minutes. During the program, students produced weekly writing samples and participated in various writing activities and strategies.

Throughout the project students receive small gifts as our way of saying ‘thank you.’ Additionally, beginning this year we are now able to offer our

participants gift cards. Students who participated in the study already will be receiving gift cards at this time as well. We love being able to show our appreciation to all of our students for their help and hard work!

Recruitment

To date, we have 84 students and their families participating in the project, and are in the process of recruiting rising 6th graders. If you know a parent who would

like their child to participate, please ask them to contact us.

Results

We have begun to take a look at some of the information from the first year of the project. One question that has been asked frequently is, ‘What have we learned?’ In this issue, we are excited to be able to share some initial findings. (see *Conference Presentations, page 3*)

Thank you from the UNC Middle School Writing Project

Thank you to all of the families and Orange County Schools faculty and staff for your support! Thank you especially to all of the students who are helping us to understand how Middle School children learn to write and the strategies that can help improve writing development. We are also grateful to the Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences for providing funding for this study.

Stephen Hooper, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator

Meet our New Staff

Let us introduce you to the folks that are working on the project!

Karin Lanz – Research Associate

Karin earned her B.S. in Psychology with a concentration in Neuroscience from Roanoke College in 2012. She has worked as a special needs tutor, habilitation technician with non-verbal individuals, and events coordinator at a summer program for students with language based learning disabilities. Her research interests include the neural correlates of language perception and production. When she has spare time she likes to read, go on adventures near and far, and enjoy time with friends and family.



Melissa Green – Research Associate

Melissa Green is our newest research associate. Melissa graduated with a B.S. in Liberal Arts with a concentration in



English from Mount Olive College. After various jobs in the business world, she decided that education was in fact her true calling. She attended

Meredith College where she earned her teaching certification. She has worked as an elementary and middle school classroom teacher for the past ten years, specifically focusing on the humanities in middle school. During her time as a classroom teacher, she became acutely aware of the immense range of abilities among students' written expression. As a result, she began to focus on the im-

provement of each student's writing ability and developed new ways to approach writing in an effort to reach all students. She is very excited to be a part of the Middle School Writing Project team at UNC. When not at work, Melissa relishes the time spent with her two teenage daughters, enjoys as much time as possible at the beach with her husband, and constantly looks for the next great book to read.

Tom Leggett – Applications Analyst

Tom is a Programmer Analyst for the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. He earned a B.A. in History from Duke University in 1987, a Programming Certification from North Carolina State University in 1999 and an MA in Liberal Studies from Duke in 2007. He has worked at FPG since 1999. In his spare time Tom enjoys travelling, creative writing and spending time with his wife, their two dogs and two cats.



John Sideris – Statistician

John is a Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. He has served as the data analyst on multiple projects ranging from investigations of developmental delays, particularly with regard to children with Fragile X syndrome and autism, to studies of efficacy of early intervention programs in childcare. His primary research interest is in measurement analysis and he has recently been involved in several projects using factor analytic and item response theory models in scale development and analysis. Currently, he has major projects un-



derway on the measurement of childcare quality and sensory features of autism.

Rebecca Jordan – Graduate Research Assistant

Rebecca earned her bachelor's degree in 2007 from the University of Richmond where she studied Spanish, Education, and Russian and was awarded the Meritorious New Teacher



Award from the Commonwealth of Virginia. She earned licensure in General Education Pre-Kindergarten to Grade Six and English as a Second Language Kindergarten to Grade 12. Upon graduation, she began her teaching career in Greensboro, NC as a first grade and third grade teacher. She quickly discovered her love for both literacy instruction and working with teachers and became the lead liaison and teacher trainer for her school with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction for the state pilot of Reading 3D. She returned for her master's degree to UNC-Greensboro where she studied Curriculum and Instruction focused on Reading Education and received licensure for Reading K-12. She became the Program Specialist for Student Interventions with the federally funded School Transformation by Actively Recruiting, Rewarding, and Retaining (STAR³) program in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, where she headed the RTI program and oversaw students' Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for the district. This prompted her desire to become a professor of education, and so she enrolled in the School of Education at UNC-Chapel Hill, where she is studying Early Childhood, Special Education, and Literacy. When Rebecca is not working with students or on her studies, she enjoys spending time with her family. During her free time, she likes travelling, cooking, eating, and reading a good book.

Conference Presentations

We've been busy this year out in the national and international community—here's a little bit about what we've been sharing!

International Society for the Advancement of Writing Research

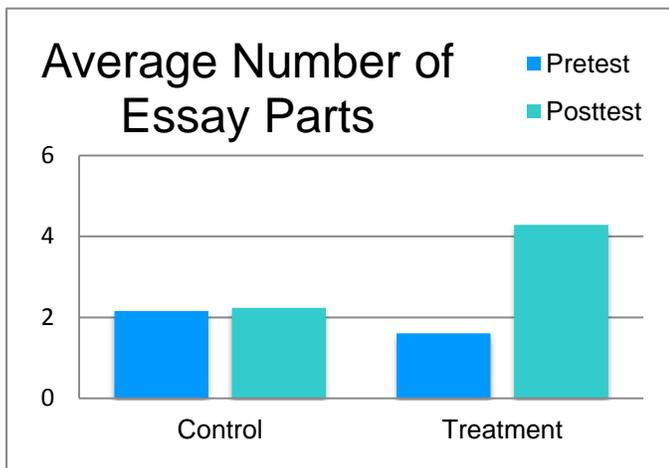


Steve and Lara organized a research symposium for the Writing Research Across Borders III conference in Paris, France this past February.

Alongside many international scholars, including Virginia Berninger, Martin Lotze, Denis Alamargot, Steve Graham and Gert Rijlaarsdam, they presented research on advances in the neurological underpinnings, measurements and intervention of writing across the lifespan.

Council for Learning Disabilities

This October, John and Lara will be in Philadelphia, PA at the 36th Annual Conference on Learning Disabilities to present initial findings from this project. These findings revealed that the groups (control and treatment) were not different on written language before the writing groups began on any of the measures of written language. However, when we looked at the change in the treatment groups' number of parts in an essay, students in the treatment group typically wrote at least 2 more parts than students in the control group (see graph). Additionally, none of the students in the control group wrote more than 5 parts but students in the treatment group wrote up to 12 parts in one essay. These findings were consistent with available evidence supporting the use of this intervention with middle school students to improve their writing skills. These preliminary findings provide strong evidence for the use of Self-Regulated Strategy Development with 6th grade students who struggle with writing.



Staff Congratulations

Learn about the exciting things going on at the project!

Stephen Hooper, PhD. – Principal Investigator

Dr. Hooper was appointed as the Chair and Associate Dean of the Department of Allied Health Sciences for the UNC School of Medicine. With his new promotion, came a new “home” for the project—we are now housed in the Department of Allied Health Sciences.



Lara-Jeane Costa, PhD. – Project Director



Lara received her Doctorate of Philosophy in Educational Psychology, Measurement, and Evaluation from UNC Chapel Hill on May 10, 2014. She has also been accepted to the Summer Research Training Institute on Cluster Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) sponsored by Northwestern University with a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences.

Sarah Vanselous – Research Associate

Sarah will begin her graduate studies in the Masters of Science Speech-Language Pathology program at UNC Chapel Hill. While she will no longer serve as a full-time Research Associate for the project, she will continue to be a part of the team as a Graduate Research Assistant.



Also, a special thank you to:



Relevant Publications

Check out what we've been writing!

Costa, L. C., Edwards, C. N., & Hooper, S. R. (under review). Writing disabilities and reading disabilities in elementary school students: Rates of co-occurrence and cognitive burden. *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*.

Costa, L. C., Ahmad, U., Edwards, C., Vanselow, S. Yerby, D. C., & Hooper, S. R. (2014). The writing side. In B. Miller, P. McCardle, & R. Long (Eds.), *Teaching reading and writing: Improving instruction and student achievement* (pp.21-33). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Hooper, S., Costa, L. C., McBee, M., Anderson, K., Yerby, D., Childress, A., & Knuth, S. (2013). A written language intervention for at-risk second grade students: a randomized controlled trial of the process assessment of the learner lesson plans in a tier 2 response-to-intervention (RtI) model. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 63(1), 44-64.

Costa, L. C., Hooper, S.R., McBee, M., Anderson, K., Yerby, D.C. (2012). The Use of Curriculum Based Measures in Young At-Risk Writers: Measuring Change Over Time and Potential Moderators of Change. *Exceptionality*, 20(4), 199-217. DOI: 10.1080/09362835.2012.724623

Frequently Asked Questions

How long is the study?

It's a 4 year study, with each child participating for 2 years of it; the assessment and Writing Intervention Program in 6th grade, and a follow up assessment in the spring of 7th grade.

How often will you see my child?

If your child is eligible after an initial screening, we will have a two-hour assessment, followed by intervention in the spring. The intervention meets twice a week for 12 weeks.

How will I find out about the results of the study?

Each family will receive a letter providing information about their child's performance on the fall assessment.

We plan to use this newsletter as one way to share information about the results of the study. For confidentiality, the study results will be reported about the group as a whole and will not include information about individual participants.

Want to know more?

Contact us!

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