



# Write On!

with the  
**Writing Skills Development Project**

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

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**STEPHEN HOOPER, PH.D.**  
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

## Welcome to the Writing Project

Welcome to the Writing Skills Development Project and to this first issue of the *Write On!* Newsletter. Thank you to all of the families and to the school faculty and staff for your support! We also are grateful to the Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences for providing the funding for this project. Thank you especially to all of the students who are helping us to study how children learn to write, the factors that affect writing skill development, and the strategies that can help improve writing development.

The development of writing skills in students presents a significant challenge for educators, particularly in this day of high-stakes testing and heightened accountability. While the understanding of the basic learning processes of reading and related instruction has grown over the past 20 years, we have only begun to understand the factors that contribute to the development of written expression in the formative elementary school years. The strategies or types of instruction that best promote the development of written expression also require careful study, and it has been only in the past decade that an increased interest in the study of written expression in young children has begun to receive the attention of researchers, clinicians, and school personnel. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003) reported that only about 28% of fourth graders could write at a proficient level or above, 58% wrote at a basic level, and 14% wrote below the basic level. Within our state of North Carolina, these data are consistent with recent trends citing less than one-half of fourth graders (49%) passing the End-of-Grade writing test for the 2004-05 school year (North Carolina Testing Program, 2005). These data are important because they indicate the national significance of writing problems in elementary education.

This study will contribute to knowledge about the development of writing in typical children as well as in children who may be at-risk for problems in written expression. Building on the work of other investigative teams, we will address the educational challenges of writing development in typical and at-risk early elementary school children. This four-year project will be one of only a few longitudinal studies focusing on the development of writing, as well as addressing interventions, in the early elementary school years.

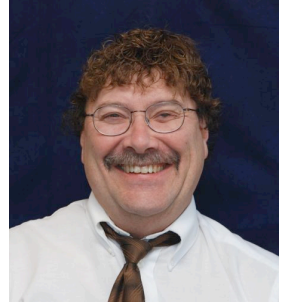
## Stephen Hooper—Principal Investigator

Steve is the Principal Investigator of the Writing Skills Development Project, as well as the Associate Director and a child neuropsychologist at UNC's Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning. He is interested in neurocognitive development, social-emotional development and functioning, and the interaction of neurocognitive factors with social-emotional functioning.

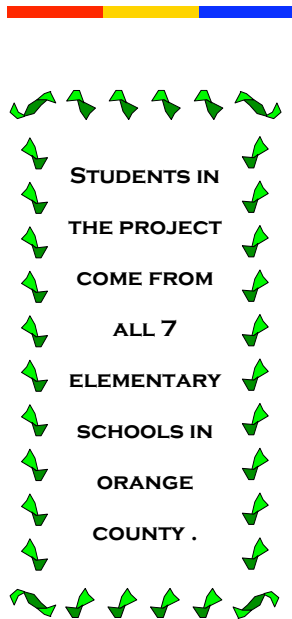
Steve graduated from Juniata College with a bachelor's degree in two fields: psychology and

education. He then studied at Western Kentucky University where he received a master's degree in clinical psychology. Steve earned his doctorate from the University of Georgia in school psychology. In addition, he participated in a clinical child psychology internship at Vanderbilt University's School of Medicine and was a postdoctoral fellow in child neuropsychology at Brown University's School of Medicine.

When he is not lecturing, Steve enjoys spending time with his wife and two children.



**STEVE IS GRATEFUL TO THE PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF FOR THEIR CONTINUED SUPPORT**



### Who, What and Where?

It has been a busy first year and a half of the study. During year 1, we enrolled 102 first grade students. This year we completed the recruitment by enrolling an additional 104 students. Students from all seven elementary schools in Orange County are participating in the study. Some of the students enrolled in the project last year have moved to other school districts, and we may be able to follow those students for at least another year. Please see the Frequently Asked Questions section on page 4 for more "moving" information.

All children have received the first yearly assessment, and we have begun the second assessment of students who enrolled in the study last spring. You may have noticed that your child brought home a small toy one day from school. At the completion of the assessment, each child was able to choose a gift as our way of saying "Thank You" for his or her help.

The intervention began in January of this year. Thirty-four second grade students, randomly chosen from the larger group, are participating in the intervention - The Writing Club. More information about the intervention will come in future issues of the newsletter.

## Donna Carlson Yerby—Learning Specialist



**DONNA IS KEEPING BUSY WITH THE STUDENTS AT CAMERON PARK AND PATHWAYS**

Donna received her bachelor's degree and master's degree in education from the University of North Carolina and has served as a learning specialist and educational diagnostician at the CDL since 2000, serving as Education Section Head since 2005. She participated in the development of clinical programs at All Kinds of Minds centers in Chapel Hill and New York.

Donna's background includes

teaching children in grades K-12, college students at UNC School of Education, and professional development modules for teachers and post-secondary instructors. In addition to her interest in the development of writing skills in young children, Donna is studying the learning profiles of children with Prader Willi syndrome, how learning is linked with neurodevelopmental profiles, and she is coordinating a

program for young adults.

Donna lives in rural Chatham County in a farmhouse that she and her husband Earl have lovingly restored. Their daughter, Hannah, attends UNC-Ashville. Donna enjoys cooking, reading, writing, and traveling. She spends time at the beach whenever she can.

## Kathleen Anderson—Project Coordinator

Kathleen is the Project Coordinator of the Writing Project. She is originally from Wisconsin where she received her bachelor's degree in speech pathology and audiology. While studying for her master's degree at UNC-Chapel Hill in Early Intervention and Family Support, Kathleen worked with researchers at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (PFG) studying the language development of children with fragile X syndrome and Down syndrome. When she completed her studies, Kathleen remained at FPG—coordinating two language studies.

Kathleen's background also includes work as a service coordinator with the Children's Developmental Services Agency in Pittsboro and many years as a preschool teacher in the Chapel Hill area. She is interested in the written and spoken communication development of children.

Kathleen lives in Carrboro with her husband, Robb. She enjoys spending time with her son and daughter-in-law, who live close by, and going to theater productions at VCU in Richmond, where her daughter is a costume design major.



**KATHLEEN ENJOYS WORKING WITH THE STUDENTS AT CENTRAL AND EFLAND-CHEEKS**

## Sean Knuth—Graduate Student

Sean Knuth is a doctoral student in the field of School Psychology. Originally from southern California, Sean attended the University of California at Santa Barbara where he was awarded a bachelor's degree in psychology. He moved to North Carolina in 2003 to pursue his education at UNC Chapel Hill. He has been involved with the Writing Skills Development

Project since fall of 2006. It gives him a chance to both help children learn and to learn a little bit himself.

In his free time, Sean enjoys spending time with his wife. When they're not taking their dog to the park, they like watching movies and traveling the triangle area trying out new restaurants.



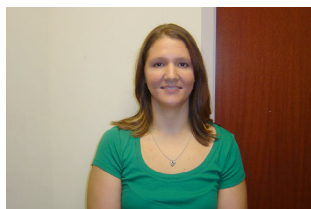
**SEAN KNUTH IS GETTING TO KNOW THE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS AT HILLSBOROUGH ELEMENTARY**

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
★ THE NUMBER ★  
★ ONE FAVORITE ★  
★ PRIZE WAS THE ★  
★ "MAGIC SPRING", ★  
★ ALTHOUGH THE ★  
★ BOWLING SET ★  
★ AND THE ★  
★ PUZZLES WERE ★  
★ CLOSE SECONDS! ★  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## Amy Childress—Graduate Student

Amy Childress is a graduate student research assistant with the Writing Skills Development Study. This is Amy's first year with the writing project, and she will be completing assessments, as well as working with students who will be participating in the intervention.

Amy graduated with a bachelor's degree in Biology from the University of Rochester



**AMY IS ENJOYING HER TIME AT NEW HOPE ELEMENTARY**

in 2001, and then returned to her hometown of Chalmette, Louisiana to teach high school math and science. During her time teaching, Amy became interested in the school challenges facing students with learning disabilities and the effect of positive teacher/student relationships on students' learning. Amy is currently pursuing these research interests as a doctoral student in the school psychology

program at UNC. Amy has worked as a school psychology extern in Orange County and Moore County and was previously a research assistant at Division TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children) on the UNC campus.

In her free time, Amy enjoys reading and is a huge football fan!

## Lara-Jeane Costa—Graduate Student



**LARA COSTA  
ENJOYS WORKING WITH  
THE STUDENTS AT  
GRADY A. BROWN**

Lara earned her bachelor's degree in 2001 at UNCW in Special Education: Behavioral and Emotional Disabilities. Upon graduation, she began her career in Wilmington, NC as a middle school, self-contained, Life Skills I/cross-categorical teacher. Due to the composition of her class, during her second year of teaching Lara appended her teaching license to include learning and intellectual disabilities. Currently, she is in her second year of the Educational Psychology, Measurement, and Evaluation master's program at UNC with plans to graduate in August. In addition to the CDL writing project, Lara is a research assistant on a Self-Regulated Learning project with her advisor, Dr. Jeff Greene.

Lara's personal research interests include educational policy, teacher retention, and program development; all in the field of special education and learning differences. Outside of school, she enjoys cooking, outdoor activities (i.e. camping, beach, bike riding), spectator sports (football, basketball), and attending performing arts productions with her family and friends.

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**Check our Link on the CDL  
Website**

**[www.cdl.unc.edu](http://www.cdl.unc.edu)**

## Frequently Asked Questions

*How long is the project?*

This is a 4-year study. The study began in the fall of 2006. It will continue until the summer of 2010.

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

Each family will receive a summary, once a year, that will provide information about their child's performance on the yearly assessment.

In addition, we hope 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

*How often will you see my child?*

All children will receive an assessment once a year. If

your child is in the intervention—the Writing Club, participation also will include two 25-minute sessions each week for about 12 weeks each year.

*Can my child continue to be in the study if we move?*

We know that some of the students will move during the course of the study. Your child will be able to continue to participate in the assessments if you move to another school in the Orange County School district.

If you move to a neighboring

school district or within an hour's drive, we may be able to follow your child for one year after the move. Depending on the distance you have moved, we would like to be able to complete the yearly assessment at least one time after the move.

The intervention program is a small group activity. Your child may not be able to continue to participate in the small group, if he/she moves to another school.

If you are planning to move, contact information is listed below.

**MOVING?**

Do you have new contact information?

We would like to stay in contact with you.

Please call Kathleen at 919-966-4844

or you can email her at [kathleen.anderson@cdl.unc.edu](mailto:kathleen.anderson@cdl.unc.edu)