



Write On!

with the Writing Skills Development Project

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The Writing Project— Writing Process



STEPHEN HOOPER, PH.D.
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Welcome to the 2010 edition of Write On! As we complete the fourth year of the study, I again want to say THANK YOU! We are so appreciative of the continued support of our dedicated families and school personnel, and especially the students who have been so willing to help us learn about how children develop writing skills.

An important part of this project was to look at the impact of an evidence-based writing program on the development of written expression in children at-risk for writing problems. In this issue, we would like to focus on writing development and how it relates to the tasks chosen for the intervention. The writing program, Process Assessment of the Learner (Berninger and Abbott, 2003), was the foundation for the Writing Club, a 24-week writing program implemented in years 2, 3 and 4 of the study with a randomly-chosen group of boys and girls participating in the study. The lessons were approximately 20-25 minutes in length and covered a number of basic writing skills and strategies, such as learning to connect a sound with a letter(s) and applying these connections to spelling and composition, in an effort to increase the automatic nature of written production. These lessons were designed to be a supplement to, rather than an alternative to, the regular classroom writing instruction. All of these lessons were taught in small groups and by interventionists trained in using the PAL Lesson Plans. We know it wasn't always easy, but we truly appreciate the support of the principals and teachers in scheduling the Writing Club.

In the early elementary school years, a number of factors may hold back writing development. One of those factors is the development of handwriting (graphomotor) skills for forming letters. Berninger and colleagues (1992) studied the skills “beginning writers bring to the task of learning to write.” They referred to these skills as lower-level developmental skills that are important in the early stages of learning to write, such as orthographic coding.

In addition to phonology (i.e., understanding the sound-symbol association), orthographic coding refers to the ability to store a word in memory and then retrieve from memory the whole word or a letter/letter combinations in the word. Children with orthographic coding problems often may forget what a word or letter looks like, and they may form

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Principal Investigator
Stephen R. Hooper, Ph.D.

Project Coordinator
Kathleen Anderson

Project Members
Donna Carlson Yerby
Sean Knuth
Lara-Jeane Costa
Kylee Miller
Rachel Kitson

Contact Us
kathleen.anderson@cdl.unc.edu
919-966-4844

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Dear Parents, Teachers, and Students,

This has been an exciting year, and it has been such a pleasure working with you! We've enjoyed watching the students grow in the three or four years that they have been in the study. Here are some highlights from this school year.



This fall, we completed the third assessment of the students who enrolled in the fall of 2007. There are 99 students in this group, representing all seven elementary schools in Orange County. Some of the students now have moved too far away for us to continue to follow, but we have had the pleasure of visiting a number of elementary schools in Alamance, Wake, Durham, and Person counties. We have been scoring the assessment measures this spring, and summaries will be sent beginning in May. The third grade intervention also began in the fall. Thirty-one third grade students participated in 24 writing lessons over a twelve-week period.



This spring, we are completing the fourth yearly assessment of the students who joined the study in the first year (2006). Eighty-eight fourth grade students are in this group. Again, some students have moved and are too far away to follow, but we have enjoyed visiting all of the elementary schools in Orange County and schools in most of the neighboring counties. The summaries will be sent out in summer. This spring, in addition to the assessments, 24 fourth grade students participated in the writing intervention. Most of the groups will be completing the 24 lessons by the middle of May.

Thank you for your support. As always, please don't hesitate to contact me, if you have any questions!

Regards, Kathleen.

Kylee Miller—School Psychology Graduate Student



KYLEE ENJOYED HER WORK AT
CENTRAL AND NEW HOPE
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Born and raised in Portland, Oregon, Kylee Miller moved to Colorado and received a bachelor's degree in Psychology and Italian from the University of Denver in 2003. She is currently finishing her second year in the doctoral program in School Psychology at UNC Chapel Hill.

Her research interests include child development, executive

function, obesity, and international education policy. She is currently working on a project regarding executive dysfunctions and services provided in the Portuguese education system, as well as assisting with an obesity study on children with ADHD at Duke University.

When not busy with school work, Kylee likes to cook, eat, play outside, and relax with friends.

IES Conference Scheduled for June 28-30, 2010

Each year the Principal Investigator, Stephen Hooper, and members of the project staff attend the annual Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (IES) meeting. The IES is the funding source for the Writing Project, and the annual meeting provides an opportunity for the team to present findings from the study and to view work completed by other researchers throughout the country. This year, Dr. Hooper will present findings on the effects of the writing intervention. A preview of the findings is included here.

Response-to-intervention was examined in a group of second grade students at-risk for writing problems. In a randomized controlled trial, 205 students were studied at grades 1, 2 and 3, with a focus on changes in writing trajectories following an evidence-based intervention during the spring of second grade. The students were selected from a single suburban-rural school system and identified as being at-risk ($n = 138$) or not at-risk (67) for writing problems, with approximately half of the students in the at-risk group randomly chosen for the writing intervention ($n = 68$ students). All students participated in the regular classroom curriculum.

IES Conference Continued on the Next Page



RACHEL ENJOYED WORKING WITH THE STUDENTS AT NEW HOPE ELEMENTARY

Rachel Kitson—School Psychology Graduate Student

Rachel grew up in Chapel Hill, NC, and attended Brown University for her undergraduate studies. While at Brown she competed competitively on the varsity indoor/outdoor track and cross country teams and completed an honors thesis in social psychology examining adolescent drug use and a concept called "mattering". She graduated with an Honors BA in Sociology.

After graduation, she moved to Manhattan. Rachel lived there for two-and-a-half years, working at an employee-rights law firm and checking out life in the big city. In 2005, she returned to Chapel Hill to pursue a PhD in School Psychology, which also happens to be her father's profession. Rachel was awarded an assistantship position at the CDL in 2009 and became very interested in the Writing Project.

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MAILING ADDRESS:

Center for Development and Learning
The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill
CB#7255
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7255

LOCATION:

Meadowmont Exchange East
1450 Raleigh Road, Suite 100
Chapel Hill, NC 27517

Phone: 919-966-4844

Fax: 919-966-2230

E-mail: kathleen.anderson@cdl.unc.edu

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the same letter or write the same word in different ways. These children will have difficulties writing automatically because they sometimes have to stop mid-word to remember how the next letter is formed.

Closely related to orthographic skills are visual-perceptual skills. Visual-perceptual skills help a child interpret information about letters (e.g., upper or lower case letters), to tell letters apart, and to decide if a letter is written correctly. A child may have problems discriminating between letters, such as between "b" and "d", or there may be difficulties knowing when a letter is not written correctly, such as being unaware that the letter "o" is not completely closed and may look like another letter. Taken together, these difficulties may hinder the fluency of a child's writing.

Also important in writing skill development are language abilities, such as vocabulary skills, and the evolving working memory system. This latter system comprises very short-term memory where information is manipulated for immediate use. Working memory abilities have been found to be extremely important to the quality of written output.

By the middle of elementary school, many (but not all!) children will have sufficient transcription skills; that is, they will have basic handwriting and spelling skills. Their writing skills will continue to progress with increased emphasis on generating text, such as, writing stories or answering questions in social studies, with attention to planning and organizing the text. Specific instruction in various aspects of discourse (content, organization, clarity, etc.) as well as planning and reviewing/revising also will be important as students age into the middle elementary school years. These increasingly important "self-regulated" strategies are critical for the ongoing development of written expression, and we hope to examine the benefits of these types of interventions in our next project.