

Write On!

The Official Newsletter of the Middle School Writing Project

June 2015
Volume 3, Issue 1

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The Current Study: Progress

Lara-Jeane Costa, PhD
Project Director

Our progress

Another exciting year has gone by for the Middle School Writing Project! In August of 2014, we began the third year of our study of written expression with middle school students. In addition to the three middle schools in Orange County that have been a part of our project in the first two years, we are very excited to report that this year we added Kestrel Heights School to our project! We screened over 500 sixth graders, in the four middle schools, and 271 were eligible for the study. A fantastic 94 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 42 seventh graders who joined the study in 2013.

Beginning in February 2015, minding the wintery weather, the new students began participating 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 strategy development excersizes.

Throughout the project students receive small gifts as our way of saying 'thank you.' Additionally, we are now able to give our participants gift cards. We love being able to show the students our appreciation of all of their hard work!



Recruitment

To date, we have 173 students and their families participating in the project, and are in the process of recruiting rising 6th graders. Parents who would like their child to participate can contact us (see page 4) or send them to our newly revamped website, www.writeonNC.org!

Results

We have begun to take a look at some of the information from the first and second years of the project. One question that has been asked frequently is "What have we learned?" In this issue of our newsletter, we are excited to be able to share some findings in addition to those we began to explore last year. So far, using both knowledge gained through the elementary project (completed in pervious years) and new data coming from the MSWP, we have published a book chapter and a paper in a reputable journal, *Learning Disabilities Quartlery*. We have quite a few other publications in the works—stay tuned, and check out page 3 for more a more detailed account of our findings and the papers and presentations we have coming up!



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Before writing club, I couldn't write an essay (although I thought I could), and now I can write a really good essay.

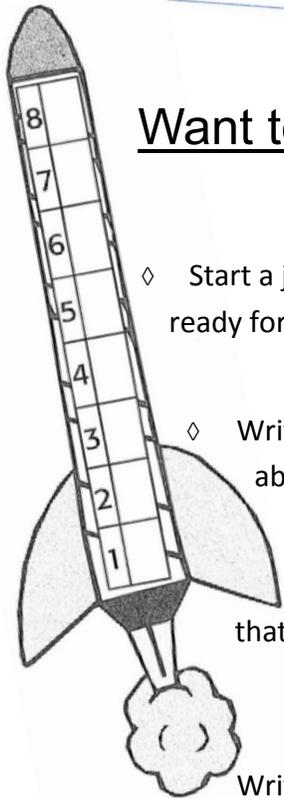
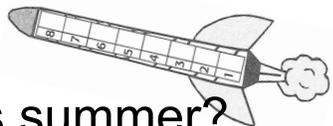
I wish I could come every day to writing club!

Thank you from the UNC Middle School Writing Project!
Thank you to all of the families, Orange County Schools faculty and staff, and Kestrel Heights 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, PhD
Principal Investigator*



My essays were boring but because of writing club they aren't boring any more!

Writing club is fun!



Want to keep your writing skills sharp this summer?

Here are some tips from us at the MSWP!

- ◇ Start a journal—any kind of writing can help keep your mind working hard, so you're ready for the fall. Plus, keeping a journal can be a fun way to help you remember all the amazing things you do with your summer vacation!
- ◇ Write a blog—a blog is basically an electronic version of a journal, but blogs can be about all sorts of things! Maybe you want to write about the games you play, or about the food you like to cook with your parents. The sky's the limit!
- ◇ Find a pen pal—do you have a cousin that lives far away? Maybe a friend that had to move to a new state? Find the address, and write a letter or email! It's fun to get mail, and writing letters can keep your writing skills top-notch!
- ◇ Get Creative—do you love to swim on your neighborhood swim team? Write a newspaper article about your team's meet. Is curling up with a good book more your style? Write a story about your favorite characters. Just keep writing!

*Sarah Vanselous
Graduate Assistant*

What Have We Learned?

The Council for Learning Disabilities October, 2015—Las Vegas, Nevada

In the last edition of our newsletter, we announced that we were headed to Philadelphia for the 36th Annual Conference on Learning Disabilities. We showed that that the control and treatment groups did not differ on written language scores 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 (NOEP), students in the treatment group typically wrote at least 2 more parts than students in the control group. 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 preliminary findings provide strong evidence for the use of Self-Regulated Strategy Development with 6th grade students who struggle with writing. Lara had a blast presenting, and learned so much from the other presenters at the conference. We are excited to get to present again at the 37th Annual Conference on Learning Disabilities in October of this year. Lara will be presenting on data from both the first and second year of our project, where we have found a large effect size of the SRSD intervention we are implementing on the treatment group students' NOEP scores. We are eager to share more details of our promising results with you in next year's newsletter!



The American Psychological Association (APA) Annual Conference 2015—Toronto, Canada

We're headed to Toronto to present on the relationship between teacher ratings of student's writing and actual writing performance! We will use scores from the Written Language Observation Scale (WLOS), a norm-referenced standardized measure with evidence of reliability, validity, sensitivity, and specificity (Hammill & Larsen, 2008), and student performance on standardized and measures of written expression. Our primary question is: What is the relationship between teachers' rankings on the WLOS and student writing performance?

Given the WLOS scores relationship to standardized measures of written expression, the results we will be presenting suggest that the WLOS could be used as a screening measure to identify students who may benefit from additional instruction or intervention focused on written expression. Furthermore, we also can speculate that when only one score is used to evaluate a student's writing ability, certain writing elements (e.g., spelling, grammar) may overshadow others (e.g., content, structure), and this may account for the lack of relationship between the WLOS and other measures. This reveals an inherent inconsistency between the way writing skills are typically measured by professionals (i.e., conventions) and other necessary components of a writing sample (i.e., structure) that are not typically included in standardized measures. Our hope is to present evidence for giving teachers better tools to score writing samples in the future.

Recent Journal Publication—Writing Disabilities and Reading Disabilities in Elementary School Students: Rates of Co-Occurrence and Cognitive Burden

While we are now wrapping up the third year of our middle school study, we are still learning from our previous study that looked at writing difficulties in elementary students. Recently, Lara and one of our RAs, Crystal Edwards, published a paper with Dr. Hooper on the co-occurrence of reading disabilities (RDs) and writing disabilities (WDs) in a population of children in first through fourth grade. Students (n=137) were identified as either typically developing (TD; n=83), WD-Only (n=38), and WD + RD (n=16). Results indicated that the rate of a WD + RD increased with advancing grades, ranging from 30% in first grade to 47% in fourth grade. This increase was secondary to the instability of group membership across all three groups (i.e., some students changed from WD to TD between grades). The number of students with a WD + RD remained relatively constant over the 4 years, with about 50% of first-grade students with a WD + RD continuing to manifest this co-occurrence through the fourth grade. There was increased cognitive burden for the students in the WD + RD group across the four grades in language and executive dysfunctions. Along with the use of progress monitoring strategies for both reading and writing in the early grades, these findings suggest the importance of assessing the cognitive underpinnings for students with a WD + RD. We plan to continue to learn more from our previous study, adding to these findings, as we learn from our current project!

Relevant Publications

Check out what we've been writing!

Costa, L. C., Edwards, C. N., & Hooper, S. R. (2015). Writing disabilities and reading disabilities in elementary school students: Rates of co-occurrence and cognitive burden. *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*. DOI: 10.1177/0731948714565461.

Costa, L. C., Ahmad, U., Edwards, C., Vanselous, 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 (Rtl) 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 in 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 Writing Program meets twice a week for 13 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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