

# Write On!

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Meet the Staff

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## Welcome to the UNC Middle School Writing Project

*Stephen Hooper, PhD.*  
Principal Investigator

Welcome to the 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.

In 2006, the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities partnered with Orange County Schools on a study investigating writing development in elementary students. We are pleased to continue this successful relationship Orange County Schools on the middle school project this year.

### Previous Work

From 2006 to 2007, two hundred and five first-grade students enrolled in the study. The students participated in assessments of written expression and other skills associated with writing development each year for four years. We also studied the efficacy of a writing intervention; sixty-eight

students were selected to participate in a semester-long writing program in second, third, and fourth grade. The results from the study showed that students who participated in the writing program had a faster rate of growth than the students who did not. Students benefited by gains in their writing skills.

The commitment and support of the families, faculty, and staff at all seven elementary schools in Orange County and the hard work and enthusiasm of the elementary school students were tremendous resources in the success of the elementary school writing project. We look forward to continuing this partnership with the faculty, staff, parents, and students in the middle schools in Orange County.

### Middle School Writing

The development of writing skills in middle school students presents a significant challenge for teachers, particularly in this day of high-stakes testing and increased accountability.



In the Nation's Report Card Writing 2007, the most recent publication of their results, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that **only 3 out of 10 eighth graders** performed at the Proficient or higher level on a national writing assessment. We have only begun to understand how writing skills develop and the factors that contribute to written expression, and we need to examine from a scientific

perspective the strategies that best encourage and advance the development of written expression in the regular classroom setting.

With the funding of this new study, researchers from the CIDD will offer a semester-long program of supplemental writing instruction to participating sixth grade students in the three middle schools in Orange County. The students will meet in small groups with project interventionists during the spring semester. Each student also will take part in an assessment of academic and other skills linked to written expression development in the fall of sixth grade and a follow-up assessment of writing skills in seventh grade.

Given the prevalence of writing problems, the high level of accountability and the accompanying need for ongoing validation of empirically-based treatments in written expression, this study will address a compelling need in education.

## The Current Study

*Lara-Jeane Costa, M. A.  
Project Coordinator*

### Our progress

In August of 2012, we began the first year of our four-year study into written expression in middle school students. We screened over 80 sixth graders and 40 were selected to participate from the three middle schools in Orange County. The participants were given an assessment that evaluated their reading ability, writing ability, and other skills such as memory. Beginning in February 2013, 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” for the hard work and help.

### What’s Next?

It has been a busy first year of the study. Having successfully completed the assessment and supplemental writing program, we then conducted post-testing with the participants.

We are currently in the process of analyzing the data and scoring the various assessments. As well, we are beginning recruitment for the second year of the study. We hope to enroll 80 new sixth graders by September.

## Meet the Staff

Let us introduce you to the folks that are working with your children.

### Stephen Hooper, PhD. – Principal Investigator

Dr. Hooper is the Principal Investigator of the Middle School Writing Project, as well as the Associate Director and a child neuropsychologist at UNC’s Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities. He is interested in neurocognitive development, social-emotional development and functioning, and the interaction of neurocognitive factors with social-emotional functioning.

Dr. Hooper graduated from Juniata College in Pennsylvania with a bachelor’s degree in psychology and education. He then studied at Western Kentucky University, where he received a master’s degree in clinical psychology and school psychology. Dr. Hooper earned his doctorate from the University of Georgia in school psychology. In addition, he was a postdoctoral fellow in child neuropsychology at Brown University’s School of Medicine and participated in a clinical child psychology internship at Vanderbilt University’s School of Medicine.



When he is not on the road traveling for work, Dr. Hooper enjoys spending time with his wife and two children.

### Donna Carlson Yerby – Learning Specialist

Donna Carlson Yerby is an Education Specialist, Clinical Scientist, and Assistant Director



at the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities at UNC where she is involved in research, clinical evaluations, and outreach services.

Donna received her bachelor’s degree and master’s degree in education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has served as a learning specialist and educational diagnostician at the CIDD since 2000- serving as Education Section Head since 2005. Donna taught grades K-12 and was formerly a clinical instructor at

UNC School of Education. As Director of Professional Development at All Kinds of Minds Institute, she developed instructional materials for understanding learning differences and trained clinicians in dynamic assessment methods. Donna has published and presented on learning disabilities,

differentiation of instruction, postsecondary education initiatives, and education reform. Donna enjoys cooking, reading, writing, and traveling. She spends time at the beach whenever she can.

**Lara-Jeane Costa – Project Coordinator**

Lara is a research specialist for the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities. She earned her bachelor’s degree in 2001 at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in Special Education: Behavioral and Emotional Disabilities. Upon graduation, she began her teaching career at Trask Middle School in Wilmington, NC as a special education teacher. Due to the composition of her class, during her second year of teaching Lara appended her teaching license to include learning and developmental disabilities. She has worked with students with disabilities as a classroom teacher, camp counselor,



and clinician. During her graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she received training as part of the Leadership Education in



Neurodevelopmental Disorders (LEND) program and Maternal and Child Health Bureau Leadership program. Currently, Lara is a doctoral candidate for the UNC School of Education in Educational Psychology, Measurement and Evaluation program. She is currently writing her dissertation, where she is examining the impact of an evidence-based instructional model for students who struggle with written expression.

When Lara is not directing the Middle School Writing Project or finishing her doctoral studies, she enjoys spending time with her husband and their two year-old son. During her free time, she likes cooking with her mom, camping with her friends, and reading a book at the beach.

**Unber Ahmad – Research Associate**

Unber is a research associate working at the Carolina Institute of Developmental Disabilities. She is currently working on a research study funded by the Institute of Education Sciences that

looks at writing difficulties in middle school students. She graduated from the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics in 2008, and then continued the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to study

psychology. She graduated from UNC-CH in 2012 earning a Bachelor’s of Science in Psychology with Honors and a minor in Linguistics. Unber also spends time volunteering with adolescent programs and tutoring younger children.

**Crystal Edwards – Research Associate**

Crystal earned her B.A. in Psychology from North Carolina State University in 2010. She has worked directly with both individuals with developmental disabilities and at-risk adolescents. Currently, she is a research assistant for the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill where she works with middle school students who struggle with writing to investigate writing strategies.



Her research interests include motivation and learning, educational policy, and adolescent development. When she has spare time, Crystal enjoys reading, baking, and spending time with family and friends.

**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 Program in 6th grade, and a follow up 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.

**Sarah Vanselous – Research Associate**

Sarah is currently a research associate at the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities. She is a 2012 graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a degree in Psychology. Her other fields of study included linguistics and speech language pathology. Outside of her courses, Sarah has worked as a teacher, camp counselor, and occupational therapy aid for children with developmental disabilities. She has also been involved with an autism outreach group in the Chapel Hill



community, and a therapeutic horseback riding center in the Charlotte area. Sarah currently works on the Middle School Writing project examining writing strategies for school age students. Future research interests include the neuroscience of both orthographic and phonological communication development. Outside of education and research, Sarah enjoys hiking, baking, swimming and traveling.

*What are we doing?*

The Writing Skills Development Project at the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities (UNC-Chapel Hill) is studying the writing skills of middle school students.

*What is our purpose?*

Learning to write is an important part of a child’s education, and we know that the writing demands increase when students enter the middle school years. This study will help us learn:

- Strategies that may improve writing skills, especially for students who may be struggling with writing
- How writing is different for students who have writing problems?
- What factors affect a student’s ability to learn to write?

*What does participation mean??*

If your child is eligible, he/she will:

- Receive an assessment of writing, language, and reasoning skills in the fall of the 6th grade
- Receive additional writing instruction during the spring of 6th grade Complete follow-up writing assessments in 7th grade
- Receive small “thank you” gifts.

*Want to know more?*  
**Contact us!**

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