

OSEP Research Institutes: Bridging Research and Practice



In this column, *Bridging Research and Practice*, three of the federally funded special education research institutes report to you, the practitioner, on their progress in areas that will be particularly helpful to you in working with your students. The U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has funded these three research institutes to study specific curricular and instructional interventions that will accelerate the learning of students with disabilities in curricular areas:

Center on Accelerating Student Learning (CASL) focuses on accelerating reading, math, and writing development in Grades K-3. The Directors of CASL are Lynn and

Doug Fuchs of Vanderbilt University. Principal Investigators include Joanna Williams at Columbia University and Steve Graham and Karen Harris at Vanderbilt University.

Research Institute to Accelerate Content Learning Through High Support for Students With Disabilities in Grades 4-8 (REACH) is examining interventions that reflect high expectations, content, and support for students. The Director of REACH is Catherine Cobb Morocco at Education Development Center in Newton, MA. Research partners include the University of Michigan (Annemarie Palincsar and Shirley Magnusson), the University of Delaware

(Ralph Ferretti, Charles MacArthur, and Cynthia Okolo), and the University of Puget Sound (John Woodward).

The Institute for Academic Access (IAA) is conducting research to develop instructional methods and materials to provide students with authentic access to the high school general curriculum. The Institute Directors are Don Deshler and Jean Schumaker of the University of Kansas, Lawrence. Research partners include the University of Oregon and school districts in Kansas, California, Washington, and Oregon.

This issue features the CASL.

What Can I Do to Help Young Children Who Struggle With Writing?

Barbara Fink-Chorzempa, Steve Graham, and Karen R. Harris

“Children that are good readers always turn out to be good writers. Poor readers usually never become good writers and often hate it. But it takes time for children to really see their own mistakes in their writing, even good writers.” Although some good readers do not become good writers (Juel, 1988), this comment from a primary grade teacher reflects a challenge that teachers face every day: teaching struggling writers, including those with special needs, not only how to write well, but to enjoy writing, too.

Learning to write is a particularly complex process. The road from novice to competent writer is paved by a variety of forces, including changes in children's strategic behavior, writing skills, knowledge, and motivation (Graham, in press). The difficulty of acquiring this essential literacy tool is reflected in the large number of children who fail to gain adequate command of it. Statistics collected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Greenwald, Persky, Ambell, & Mazzeo, 1999), found that only 23% of the fourth-grade students tested across the United States scored at or above a profi-

cient level, and slightly more than 60% of fourth graders demonstrated only partial mastery of the knowledge and skills they needed to do grade level work.

How can we best help students who experience difficulty learning to write? Clearly, a “one size fits all” approach to writing instruction is not appropriate. Beginning writers' instructional needs vary depending upon their knowledge, skills, will, and strategic behaviors (Graham, in press), and some children, including those with special needs, require extra help in order to maximize their writing development. However, in a recent national survey, a surprisingly large number of teachers do little to adapt their writing programs to students' needs. Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, and MacArthur (2003) reported that 20% of the primary grade teachers they surveyed made no adaptations for struggling writers, whereas another 24% made only one or two adaptations.

It is especially important that writing instruction in the primary grades is designed so that it meets the needs of all children, including those with special

needs. Providing effective and appropriate instruction right from the start, provides the foundation needed to ensure that all students become competent writers. The success of such efforts depends, at least in part, on making instructional adaptations for students who find writing difficult (Graham & Harris, 2002).

In this article, we identify a variety of instructional adaptations that teachers make for the struggling writers in their classroom. We draw upon a survey we conducted with a randomly selected national sample of 153 primary grade teachers (Graham et al., 2003). Teachers were asked to identify the instructional adaptations they made for the weakest writers in their classrooms. More specifically, they were asked to indicate how often they employed 19 different instructional adaptations with these students. Teachers were further asked to identify any other adaptations they made for these children. Although we did not collect evidence that the adaptations that teachers reported making were effective, the types of adaptations they made matched what is currently known about the strengths

and weaknesses of struggling writers (Graham & Harris, 2002). Nevertheless, because these adaptations were not empirically validated, we recommend that the effectiveness of each adaptation be carefully monitored as they are applied in the classroom with students with or without special needs.

Adaptations made by the primary grade teachers in the Graham et al. (2003) survey are included in Table 1. These are grouped into four areas: basic writing skills, writing processes, instructional modifications, and other adaptations. We examine each of these areas next.

Basic Writing Skills

Struggling writers often experience difficulty mastering basic writing skills (e.g., Deno, Marston, & Mirkin, 1982; Graham & Harris, 2002; Juel, 1988). The teachers in the Graham et al. (2003) study indicated that they spent more time teaching such skills to the struggling writers in their classroom. This included providing extra time teaching handwriting, spelling strategies, phonics for spelling, punctuation and capitalization, and grammar.

Some of the teachers also indicated that they attempted to circumvent students' difficulties with basic writing skills, like handwriting and spelling, by allowing children to dictate their compositions or write with a keyboard (e.g., Alpha Smart). Others reported that they modified instruction by creating personalized spelling lists for weaker writers to study or by developing sentence completion activities to improve sentence construction skills. Still other teachers noted that they directly helped struggling writers by spelling words for them or by creating a word bank for the child to use that contained commonly misspelled words.

Writing Processes

In addition to their difficulties with basic writing skills, struggling writers also experience problems mastering writing processes, such as planning and revising (Graham & Harris, 2002; McCutchen, 1995). The teachers in the Graham et al. (2003) investigation reported that they spent more time teaching revising to struggling writers, and many of them indicated that they provided adaptations that supported planning as well. These

typically involved the use of procedures that supported the thinking and content generation processes involved in planning. For example, this included using writing prompts or graphic organizers to stimulate students' ideas about a topic as well as encouraging students to "talk-out" or draw a story in advance of writing it. To support the revising process of struggling writers, some teachers noted that they prompted these students to read their papers aloud to locate errors in need of revision, or provided them with a revising/editing checklist that helped them focus their attention when revising.

Instructional Modifications That Support Learning to Write

Teachers taught mini-lessons, retaught skills and strategies, and conferenced with struggling writers more often than they did with average writers (Graham et al., 2003). For example, this teacher's comment illustrates how mini-lessons were incorporated throughout the day: "Daily grammar, spelling, and composition lessons are necessary and woven into everything we do, be it letter writing or a description of something we do in science." Another teacher noted that because many of her students are weaker writers, she often incorporates aspects of writing instruction into other areas such as solving mathematics word problems.

The positive effect of using journals in the classroom was noted by many teachers, but responses did not clearly reflect this was an adaptation for weaker writers only. For example, one teacher noted, "Journal writing is an important tool to use for expression!" Another teacher stated, "We have been writing since day one. Journal writing or free writing gets them used to putting words on paper. You start with writing a sentence or two—work with those sentences, then, work your way up." A third teacher shared this about her program "Although we publish something each week in our class, I see more growth in daily journal writing—it comes from the heart, it is not corrected and it is only shared if the child chooses to share it." Even though the use of journals was not noted as an exclusive adaptation for struggling writers, some of the teachers in the Graham et al. (2003) study viewed it as a powerful tool for their

weaker writers as well as their more skilled writers.

Other Adaptations

Teachers identified a variety of additional adaptations they made, including the use of peer assistance. For instance, a number of teachers indicated that writing occurred in heterogeneous groups, where the writing of a paper was a cooperative effort. Other teachers indicated that they had older students tutor or work with struggling writers in their classroom.

Teachers further used a number of activities to increase the independence of struggling writers. This included encouraging struggling writers to use invented spellings, making it possible for them to produce a draft without worrying too much about the spelling of each and every word. In addition, some teachers provided struggling writers with alternative writing assignments, allowing them to work on tasks that were more appropriate to their writing level.

The importance of motivating struggling writers was also recognized by many teachers. Some teachers simply indicated that encouragement and praise was a necessary adaptation for struggling writers, whereas other teachers emphasized the importance of encouraging students to think of themselves as "writers." As one teacher noted, when "working with young children, I think it is important that they gain a confidence in writing..." Another teacher commented that, "I believe that we must show children that writing is a wonderful experience—and they will love to write."

Conclusion

Achieving a successful writing program in which each child, including those with special needs, experiences success, involves the combined effort of the whole school (Cunningham & Creamer, 2003). The following comment reflects this, illustrating the importance of each teacher as well as the broader commitment of the school as a whole.

I am a good writing teacher. I can see a daily emergence of skills in my students' writing. I can articulate what third graders do and the most efficient and effective ways to teach them specific writing skills, such as topic development,

Table 1. Examples of Instructional Adaptations Made by Primary Grade Teachers for Teaching Writing

TYPE OF ADAPTATIONS	
Basic Writing Skills	Extra handwriting instruction Extra spelling instruction Extra grammar instruction Extra punctuation and capitalization instruction Extra instruction for writing sentences Permit students to dictate compositions Permit students to compose on a keyboard Extra time to practice writing skills
Writing Processes	Extra revising instruction Teach specific strategies for planning Extra time to practice using planning and revising skills
Instructional Modifications That Support Learning to Write	Extra conferencing with students Extra mini-lessons Additional reteaching of skills and strategies
Other Adaptations	Writing or tutoring assistance from a peer Encourage the use of invented spelling Alternative writing assignments Extra encouragement

details, and sentence structure. I'm very proud of how we teach writing in our school and how it is valued by teachers and students.

It is essential that this collaborative effort be designed to help all students acquire the knowledge, skills, strategic behaviors, and motivation needed to become competent writers. To do this for each child requires making necessary adaptations for those who struggle with writing as suggested here.

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