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Writing Matters

The following article is a reprint of Center Occasional Paper #37. Its aim was to provide a summary of research being conducted by project directors under the auspices of the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy. Sarah Warshauer Freedman is director of the Center, and Fred Hechinger is senior advisor to the Carnegie Corporation and former education reporter for the New York Times. Hechinger is also co-chair of the Center's National Advisory Board. For a list of other Center publications, write to the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, School of Education, 5513 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.

A modern culture that has been taught to believe that "the medium is the message" is in danger of forgetting that the message, however transmitted, depends on the people's ability to write and read it. When there is reason to question the state of that ability, the initial impact on a new generation's learning constitutes a threat to young people's, and the society's, future.

The American public is ready for major improvements in the quality of public education. The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy concentrates on research aimed at achieving these improvements and translating them into practice for all age groups. The Center's research creates a better understanding of how writing is best learned, taught, and used for learning in school and life.

The Center's current research builds on findings from its first five years (1985-1990), which showed that the teaching and learning of writing needs to be improved and reshaped. Most importantly, Center research has already shown that our schools need a greater diversity of teaching approaches that recognize the skills students already bring with them, that recognize the variety of writing practices students need to learn, that seek to give students the opportunity to find their own "voices" in writing, and that connect with students' lives.

In this report, we begin by discussing new findings related to the early years of schooling, moving from there to a focus on the later years, considering important issues such as the controversies surrounding the assessment of writing, the professionalization of teaching, and the challenges of educating students who do not speak English as their first language.

Early Writing

In the early primary grades, it does not matter so much what or how children write but rather that they begin to write and to reflect upon what they feel is important for them, giving themselves and their teachers a starting place. Anne Haas Dyson's research offers educators new ways of thinking about literacy teaching and learning. She uncovers language resources in the children that are often ignored. For example, the African-

American children whom she observed used language in metaphoric and poetic ways that are not expected by many teachers. These sophisticated language skills provided a strong foundation for their writing in school. These observations apply to the early writing potential of all children.

But there is no standard rule for the early teaching of writing. Children learn in different ways. Some need to draw, write, and talk playfully with other children to develop their ideas and write about them. Others need to perform and entertain an audience. Even beginning writers like to have a more extensive audience than just their teacher, but they need audiences that are appreciative, not just critical, of their work. Parents and teachers should be aware of how they themselves use language — in stories they share, jokes they tell, songs they enjoy — and how they listen to and appreciate young children's language, oral or written.

Carol Stack, like Dyson, indicates that many low-income African-American children may bring resources to school that are now often being overlooked. Her study focuses on family resources that may provide valuable help in teaching children to write. This research explores how to promote better understanding of the diversity of homes from which children come and how to forge closer relationships between school and parents.

Connections with the Past

Almost as soon as young children have learned to write, they can begin to use that new skill to learn. Matthew Downey moves from Dyson's findings about how children first learn to write to examine how writing can help to spark the interest of third graders in how people lived in an earlier age. This is the beginning of the study of history. Following the new *California History-Social Science Framework*, Downey sets the stage for history learning. In a corner of the classroom, he places simple "history centers," in which children make discoveries about earlier times. These "history centers" are stocked with artifacts, clothes, books, photographs, and original documents from some period in the past. The children play with the artifacts and clothes, read the materials, and write journals, essays on topics of interest to them, and their own historical fiction. They develop a sense of what history means — the ability to step into the shoes of someone who lived in another time, see the world from that person's point of view, and make connections with the past. The development of such historical understanding also requires a knowledge of facts, but this should be attained without rote memorization.

By the time children begin the third grade, they have already absorbed a good deal of historical information. Much of it is "holiday history" acquired during the primary grades through the celebration of Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, the Presidents' Day, and Martin Luther King's birthday. Along with vivid images, the students pick up much misinformation, disconnected fragments, historical half-truths, and stereotypes. Third grade is not too early to give students an opportunity to learn about history and examine critically the knowledge they have brought with them.

The Portfolio Movement

In the face of growing dissatisfaction with the methods and instruments currently used to judge what students know, the Center is looking at new ways of evaluating writing. Robert Calfee is studying the growing use of portfolios of student work in elementary and middle schools. Portfolios include samples of student writing. They relieve the unnatural time pressures placed on children by standardized writing tests. However, at present much uncertainty remains about the use of portfolios. Critics fear that portfolios may lead to chaotic standards and create an attitude that "anything goes" in assessment.

Calfee's project raises the following questions: What do educators really mean when they say that they are "doing portfolios"? What should be included in the folder? What process should be used to evaluate the student's work? What standards should be used to decide on the adequacy of student work? What can the assessments be used for? Some educators have proposed that portfolios replace standardized tests altogether, but what if every classroom approaches the task with different processes and standards?

Calfee finds that the portfolio movement has the elements of a positive revolution: teachers regaining control of assessment policy; tasks that require students to demonstrate what they have learned; "bottom up" rather than "top down" decisions. The use of portfolios found teachers spending much time and energy rethinking the meaning of their work and feeling good about their new commitment. A common theme is "ownership." Teachers report that they sense that this movement puts them in charge of the way they teach, and that students benefit from a greater responsibility to select and critique their writing in portfolios.

Because portfolios are an in-house way to test writing, their use tends to collide with support for traditional external testing.

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teachers conduct research in their classrooms; the university team, along with local site coordinators, provides support for the teachers and in collaboration with the teachers will synthesize the findings across the classrooms. One goal of this project is to offer a model for merging university-based and teacher research. In the end, we think this combination of varied kinds of knowledge will provide new understandings of what's involved in literacy use in urban multicultural settings.

Teacher research has a major role to play in the realm of educational inquiry. There are many issues only teachers can study. Teachers know what is problematic for them and what they need more information about. And teachers ultimately will be the ones who will have to solve their particular classroom problems. But university researchers can provide useful information to teachers in their search for solutions.

Q: What is the most satisfying aspect of your work with the Center?

My most satisfying work with the Center has been the opportunity to collaborate broadly with a number of folks — with National Writing Project liaisons and colleagues in the Urban Sites Network, with teachers who have been involved in research projects both as teacher researchers and collaborators, with graduate students who have made major contributions to the Center mission, with researchers who are conducting Center projects or who are conducting projects affiliated with the Center, with the Bay Area Writing Project leaders and teachers, with colleagues in professional organizations. It has been satisfying to know that the Center provides a national information service for writing research. I enjoy fielding phone calls and answering letters from colleagues from around the country who are grappling with interesting issues and who open up dialogues with the Center. I have learned a great deal from my varied colleagues, and that's indeed satisfying.

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The use of portfolios underscores the importance of writing in the curriculum. Teachers cannot build portfolios unless students write frequently in the classroom. If properly kept, portfolios also give parents better insights into their children's progress that is more informative than a simple grade on a report card.

Calfee suggests three possible outcomes of the portfolio movement:

1. It will go away for lack of support. Assessment via portfolios, if taken seriously, entails much work for teachers (and students). "Who's interested?" will eventually determine its fate.
2. It will become standardized. There are already commercially distributed preprinted folders.
3. It will incite a genuine revolution — but only if accompanied by other systemic changes in the educational process. That prospect is compelling, but it remains to be seen whether changes in assessment will be the policy lever for school reform.

Real World Writing

Good writing is essential not only in elementary and secondary schools but in higher education and in the "real world." Anyone who has tried to make sense of an instructional manual for a VCR or computer knows that the effective use of technology depends in large measure on writers who can explain complex procedures clearly to varied consumers. Effective writing skills are needed to get and hold a job, to apply for and be admitted to college, to navigate through an infinite variety of forms and reports. In a project that is just beginning, Glynda Hull is studying the new demands for writing in the work place of tomorrow.

John R. Hayes and Karen A. Schriver are studying innovative ways to evaluate the effectiveness of writing both in the classroom and in "real world" situations. They find that when writers have an opportunity to see how their intended readers actually respond, they learn to anticipate how to serve their readers better as they write.

Linda Flower focuses on the fact that arguments take different forms for different audiences and for different purposes. Sometimes, especially in university classes, students read and synthesize material. They learn to understand the differences between writing to

present a fair, balanced view of controversial issues in the academic world as compared with trying to win a case, as in political campaign literature or television commercials.

Teacher Research

At a time when there is much emphasis on the need to professionalize teaching as well as on school-based management, teachers have begun to engage in research. This does not imply that all teachers must do research to be considered professionals, but that teacher research must be made financially possible. The relationship of such research to effective teaching and teachers' unique position to contribute classroom-oriented knowledge should be given the consideration it has lacked in the past.

Sandra R. Schecter's project explains the effects on teaching that derive from writing teachers' own research concerning classroom learning. Schecter finds that one serious limitation is that teachers have difficulty finding sufficient time to write about their research. However, her findings suggest that support to enable teachers to come together in groups to conduct their own classroom-based inquiry allows teachers to overcome feelings of isolation and fragmentation and encourages them to be committed to and engaged in their mission as professional educators.

A new Center project directed by Sarah W. Freedman and Elizabeth Simons is coordinating teacher researchers from around the nation to provide insights into literacy learning in urban multicultural classrooms.

Non-Native Speakers

Several million students who speak little English are currently enrolled in American public schools and the numbers are increasing. Thousands arrive in the U.S. annually without any English language skills; most of these students speak Spanish or an Asian language. The research by Guadalupe Valdés and Sau-ling Wong has shown that most of these new immigrants are already proficient writers in their first language. There is an imminent danger that these children will be considered lacking in academic potential and thereby set up for failure. Valdés and Wong's research stresses that many present methods of trying to help students become proficient in English literacy are seriously flawed. They observed strategies in teaching reading and writing in English that required teenagers to fill in blanks, cut out pictures, or color in drawings. This in no way improves their reading and writing skills in English and tends to impugn their intelligence and self-esteem. These practices are based on a lack of understanding of these children's abilities and their previous

education in their first language. As a result, then, students either tune out or rebel and become disruptive. A curriculum that focuses only on teaching spoken English limits these students' capacities to cope with the American curriculum. These adolescents must learn to read, write, and listen as soon as they enter American schools if they are to succeed in their studies.

Parents could help to improve the education of their children by giving school personnel information about their children's reading and writing skills in their first language. However, the schools cannot afford to wait for parents, who are usually non-native speakers themselves, to provide this information.

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There is a need for further study to determine to what extent these findings are broadly applicable. The national study by Freedman and Simons will be coupled with the Valdés and Wong study to suggest new approaches to benefit these students.

Educational Policy

While the improvement of education must begin in the classroom and depends mainly on local and state support, the task involves policymakers at all levels. Their judgment and leadership is needed to implement new approaches suggested by the Center. Hopes for improved teaching and learning are largely based on reforms initiated in the classroom rather than those mandated from above. This, however, does not relieve the authorities at the top of responsibilities for the support of changes intended to transform action in the classroom. On the contrary, action in the classroom depends, to a large degree, on support at the district, state, and federal levels. The Center hopes that research conducted under its auspices can be translated as rapidly as possible into teaching and learning practice. This cannot be accomplished without at least a green light, and whenever possible, active support from those who determine educational policies.

At a time when existing assessment instruments and policies are under scrutiny, it is crucial that those who will eventually make the decisions about the use of new evaluation procedures and instruments help to remove obstacles to reform. At the start, policymakers

should carefully consider the outcomes and recommendations of the Center's research cited in this report. For example, the emerging use of portfolios to measure students' achievement and progress needs to be reviewed and, if found effective, supported at all levels of educational decision-making. This clearly includes those who determine policies for teacher education and development. Where the changes require wider understanding by the American public, and particularly parents of school-aged children, policymakers should join in explaining the reasons for changed practices.

Because of current efforts to give classroom teachers greater responsibilities and powers in the reform of teaching and learning, research by classroom teachers themselves deserves the kind of support that has generally been reserved for academic research. Recognition of teacher researchers' accomplishments at the higher levels of educational policymaking will greatly enhance the professional standing of classroom teachers and their status within the community.

The plight of a large and growing number of youngsters at all age and grade levels who enter school without any knowledge of English constitutes a clear and present emergency. The Center's research documents beyond any doubt the inadequate, and often severely damaging, approach to these youngsters' educational needs. Remedies include and indeed highlight the importance of effective instruction in the writing and reading of English, with attention to the level of literacy in these children's native languages. Most Chinese and Mexican-origin students who enter the American schools at the middle or high school level come with extensive prior schooling and well-developed writing skills in their native languages. Teachers should understand their educational background and provide them as rapidly as possible with English writing and language skills to enable them to continue their progress on the basis of prior achievements and newly-acquired skills.

All of this requires a greater knowledge on the part of their teachers of the educational systems and cultural as well as home background of these students. This means that the improvement of present practices is of national importance and calls for support from policymakers at all levels. Currently, students lack opportunities to prepare for existing tests, such as high school competency tests. These tests unfairly penalize these students and stand in the way of their educational progress, including graduation from high school. Such policies should be reexamined and, if necessary, changed or eliminated.

Much of the Center's research dealing with improved educational practice, from kindergarten to adulthood, points to new strategies aimed at reducing educational failure and providing the nation with a more literate generation, able to cope with new demands on the work force. Skills in written expression are an absolute prerequisite, which deserve the support of community, business, and political leaders. The ability to communicate in spoken and written language is no academic luxury; it is a key to economic and social success in a competitive society.

Center Research Projects And Project Directors

Diversity and Literacy Development in the Early Years — Anne Haas Dyson, *University of California at Berkeley*

Writing to Learn History in the Intermediate Grades — Matthew T. Downey, *University of California at Berkeley*

The Oral and Written Language Growth of Non-English-Background Secondary Students — Guadalupe Valdés and Sau-ling Wong, *University of California at Berkeley*

Writing in the Multicultural Secondary Classroom — Sarah Warshauer Freedman and Elizabeth Simons, *University of California at Berkeley*

Teacher Research in Action — Sandra R. Schecter, *University of California at Berkeley*

Evaluating Writing Through Portfolios — Robert Calfee, *Stanford University*

Experimental Approaches to Evaluating Writing — John R. Hayes and Karen A. Schriver, *Carnegie Mellon University*

The Writing of Arguments Across Diverse Contexts — Linda Flower, *Carnegie Mellon University*

Writing from Academic Sources — Linda Flower, *Carnegie Mellon University*

Families, Literacy, and Schooling — Carol B. Stack, *University of California at Berkeley*

Changing Work, Changing Literacy? A Study of Skill Requirements and Development in a Traditional and Restructured Workplace — Glynda Hull, *University of California at Berkeley*