CHARACTERISTICS OF AN
effective writing literacy program

By Candi Mascia Reed

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Learning to write is an arduous undertaking for every student; for deaf and hard of hearing students, it can be particularly difficult. Too often, they arrive in school with minimal literacy skills, experience subsequent difficulties in writing standard English, and, unfortunately, still graduate with reading levels below those of their hearing peers (Commission on Education of the Deaf, 1988; Johnson, Liddell & Erting, 1989; Quigley & Paul, 1990; National Agenda, 2005).

After teaching Writing Workshop and English courses to deaf and hard of hearing students for 25 years, I decided to focus my doctoral dissertation on the shared characteristics of writing programs. I did a qualitative study, used summative evaluations, and collected data from three kindergarten through grade six programs. Each program had instruction in small-group classes with a teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students; however, educational placement and mode of communication varied significantly:

- **School #1 (Total Communication)**: This was a day school located in a suburb of New York. The school did not have a partnership with any local school district; therefore, no students were placed in mainstream classes with hearing peers. However, the school had joined in a Literacy Collaborative Partnership with a neighboring university.

- **School #2 (oral/aural only)**: This was a day school housed in a host school site in a suburb of New Jersey. It included teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students who worked with general education teachers in mainstream classes as well as a few small group classes of deaf and hard of hearing students. While the teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students in mainstream classes were afforded some writing literacy interactions with the host school's general education teachers, those teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students who taught small group classes were afforded much less interaction.

- **School #3 (ASL, auditory/oral, special needs)**: This was a private, state-supported school located in a suburb of New York. In 1991, the school had adopted a bilingual-bicultural instruction model, and in 2002 an auditory-oral pre-school program was added. Educators in School #3 provided three programs for deaf and hard of hearing students: an ASL program, an auditory/oral program, and a special needs program.

Photos courtesy of Candi Mascia Reed

Right: Students in the pre-kindergarten/kindergarten class celebrate Dr. Seuss's birthday with their own stories about the Cat in the Hat.

A review of the literature in general education and deaf education, federal initiatives in promoting student writing, program evaluation, and leadership characteristics led to the formation of a conceptual base for my research. I would explore shared literacy standards through a theoretical framework guided by the following:

- **SCHOOL CULTURE, VALUES, AND BELIEFS:** *What are some of the behaviors, customs, and beliefs in a school community that would promote and sustain a writing literacy program?*

- **ACADEMIC QUALITY:** *What curriculum components, practices, and assessments used by educators in school communities address writing literacy that fit the needs of students in that community?*

- **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** *How should professional development prepare teachers to meet the writing literacy needs of students?*

- **TECHNOLOGY IN LITERACY:** *How might wireless technology enhance the writing performance of students?*

- **PARENT/FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND TRAINING:** *How can educators encourage parent/family involvement to help develop student writing abilities?*

school cultural values and beliefs necessary for establishing an effective writing program. In addition, we developed a School Action Plan to closely monitor other areas addressed in the study, including:

- The needs of students with additional disabilities and cultural/educational diversity of the student population

- Ongoing assessment and documentation of change in students' writing ability

- Implementation of successful professional development practices

- Teaching of written English grammar

- Encouraging parent/family involvement in promoting student writing literacy

- **ASSESSMENT PRACTICES:** *How are student data and assessment practices used to assess writing literacy in school communities?*

I interviewed school administrators, teachers, and staff members, including a literacy coach in School #1. I observed and video-recorded teachers during writing instruction in the classroom, using an observation guide to document my observations. I collected documentation of student writing, assessment pieces, and background historical information. This helped me understand the philosophy and culture of each school.

Perspectives of Teachers and Administrators
A Summary of Findings

An analysis of the data derived from administrator and teacher interviews indicated that the dominant themes and shared characteristics that influenced writing programs across the three school sites were:

- A school culture supporting writing literacy
- Diversity of the student population and student needs
- Professional development needs
- Assessment practices
- Teaching English grammar
- Concerns with lack of parent/family involvement in promoting writing literacy

Changing Our Schools
From Research to Practice

In the Bergen County Special Services School District Programs for the Deaf, pre-kindergarten through grade 12, in Hackensack, New Jersey, we focused for one year on one of the research findings from this study. We wanted to establish

Pre-kindergarten Through
Eighth Grade Changes

The pre-kindergarten through eighth grade program at the Union Street School, where our program for deaf and hard of hearing students is located, uses the Hackensack School District curriculum. The Hackensack School District re-designed and re-evaluated its writing literacy program recently due in part to the impending implementation of the National Common Core Standards (*www.corestandards.org*). We adapted Hackensack's Writer's Workshop Curriculum, and teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students were trained along with the general education teacher population. Nevertheless, the school culture, values, and beliefs about the importance of teaching writing needed to be fortified so that classroom practices and approaches to writing development specific to our deaf and hard of hearing students could be implemented.

Last year, after establishing specific measurable, attainable, and realistic goals, educators and administrators in the pre-kindergarten through eighth grade program designed a timetable to establish a stronger, more effective school culture to support teaching and assessing student writing. This year we have focused on the practices identified in the study. As a result:

- Staff meet each week in an Assessment Professional Learning Community (PLC) to discuss student writing and review and analyze writing curriculum across grade levels.

- Staff use a single pre- and post-assessment from the *Starting With Assessment* writer's toolkit (French,1999).

- Student writing is prominently displayed throughout the building.

- Teachers have become more consistent in using curriculum-based language related to writing instruction across grade levels.

- Staff have designed an in-house Student Assessment Profile Page for each student that shows—in addition to pre- and post-reading and math assessment scores—a pre- and post-writing assessment score, formative assessments, and strategies used throughout the school year as well as end-of-year assessment results.

- The Parent Teacher Organization includes topics specific to helping parents use writing as a communication and literacy tool within their homes in bi-monthly Saturday meetings.

High School Changes

Changing the culture, values, and beliefs about writing at the high school level proved difficult. Deaf and hard of hearing students attend Hackensack High School, where they are placed either in mainstream general education classes or in resource, small group classes with hearing students and a special education teacher. Working in tandem with general education and special education teachers, teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students provide consultation to the teachers and modifications and accommodations for students. In addition, they pre-teach, re-teach, and support concepts for all subjects in mandatory Study Skills classes as well as provide small-group instruction for English Lab classes that strengthen concepts learned in general education and special education English classes.

In the face of this structural difficulty, our teachers and staff members met to establish policies and practices in writing literacy and assessment for our high school students. Agreeing that they needed to support student writing and not just relegate that to the general or special education teacher, the teachers and staff members developed a plan that specifically addressed student writing literacy and assessment, and aided in organizing and developing the initial phases of promoting and sustaining a school culture, values, and beliefs specific to writing literacy.

This plan, first implemented last year, incorporates the collection of high school students' writing samples, using both curriculum-based and performance-based writing assessment measures, providing more professional development to general education teachers, initiating a student-driven and student self-assessed writing portfolio, and delineating individual student interventions based on assessment analysis of student writing.

Looking Across Program Needs
Pre-kindergarten Through 12th Grade

When teachers in both Hackensack Programs for the Deaf meet in an Assessment PLC, they work hard as they dialogue about the issues that drive their instruction, challenge students, and address the diversity of academic levels among students. Lively and thoughtful conversations enable teachers to share ideas, practices, and resources about teaching writing, English grammar, and vocabulary and replace teacher isolation and uncertainty.

The Assessment PLC in the high school reviews the writing curriculum used in the high school for students in mainstream English classes and students in resource rooms with special education teachers. Consultant teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students administer pre- and post-writing assessments and, this year, the staff members will meet to determine additional assessment practices. With the data collected on their students' writing, the consultant teachers will share the assessment results with the mainstream teachers, continuing to provide modifications and accommodations to students based on their needs but with stronger and more informed data to guide their support.

Our effort to re-evaluate and re-vitalize teachers' understanding of their work with writing literacy is helping to improve instruction at all levels. It's also helping to provide a sense of community for hardworking teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students.

Literacy Programs:
Recommended Practices

The following practice recommendations are suggested for administrators and educators. The implementation of these recommendations will address promoting writing literacy in a school community regardless of educational placement or communication methods (Mascia Reed, 2009).

- Establish a school-site writing literacy program aligned to the National Common Core Standards across grade levels.

- Establish guidelines for a purposeful school community, specifically on expectations for school culture, values, and beliefs about writing literacy and the school's writing literacy program.

- Establish a school-wide plan to implement a writing literacy program that will address the individual needs of a diverse student population.

- Establish Writing Literacy Leadership Teams or PLCs for shared decision making on the school's writing literacy

program, including curriculum, materials, and assessment across all grade levels.

- Establish a school-site data-management system to provide timely and reliable information that displays individual student academic growth in writing literacy.

- Provide ongoing professional development on classroom-based formative assessment, monitoring tools that are teacher and student friendly.

- Establish opportunities for school-site professionals to share knowledge, skills, and attitudes specifically on writing intervention strategies.

- Provide ongoing professional development to teachers on computer technology and writing literacy.

- Provide ongoing professional development to teachers of students with additional disabilities.

- Develop action-research projects as professional development activities.

- Establish opportunities for school-site professionals to share knowledge, skills, and attitudes specifically on writing intervention strategies.

- Establish a Family Literacy Focus Group that includes information to parents and families on school-wide culture, values, and beliefs about writing literacy as well as parent/family interventions for working with students on writing skills.

For the complete dissertation, see PROQUEST #3405455 or visit http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/246.

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