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Rebecca P. Harlin
Buffalo State College

Sally E. Lipa
State University of New York

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Assessment: Insights into Children's Beliefs and Perceptions About Process Writing

**Rebecca P. Harlin
Sally E. Lipa**

How do children acquire knowledge about written language? Investigations of emergent literacy have shown that children's written language knowledge reflects their cultural environment (Clay, 1982; Kastler, Roser, and Hoffman, 1987). At home, children observe their parents writing grocery lists, letters to friends and relatives, and telephone messages, thereby learning the functions of written language as they are used in daily life (Morgan, 1987; Purcell-Gates, 1986). Independently, children experiment with their own messages, incorporating scribble, pictures and random letters. Often their written products mirror the functional writing their parents modeled (Rowe, 1989). In school, additional opportunities to learn about written language are presented. Some tasks are inherent to the school setting, such as reports and labels, while others resemble those practices at home (Dyson, 1984). Children in classrooms where traditional writing instruction prevails find constraints placed upon their writing by their teacher, such as topic, length and purpose.

In contrast, classrooms emphasizing the writing process involve the student in a wider array of writing, e.g., journals, learning logs, letters and descriptions; and provide choices of topics, time spent writing and social interaction. For each aspect of the writing process — rehearsal, drafting, revising and publishing, children learn the strategies real authors employ. To generate writing ideas for a child's topic, teachers model strategies such as webbing, brainstorming and drawing. During drafting, children are encouraged to develop their topic while focusing on the intended message, not the mechanics of spelling and punctuation. When a first draft has been shared with peers and feedback provided, students return to the draft to elaborate, delete and clarify ideas. Following subsequent peer group sharing sessions, the draft is further refined and attention paid to spelling, punctuation and revising ungrammatical or awkward sentences. When it has been edited by the writer, peers and the teacher, it is published in final form and shared with an appreciative audience.

The teacher's perceptions of the writing process and the instructional program affect children's understanding and attitudes toward writing. Children who experience the traditional writing program tend to view writing as a product where correctness, form, neatness and spelling are more important than substance (Boljonis and Hinchman, 1988). Conversely, children in process writing classrooms view writing as communication (Dahl, 1988; Dickinson, 1986; Mangano and Allen, 1986). Children's perceptions of writing are important. How can they be determined? A forced-choice questionnaire administered to a group of students provides one means of tapping students' beliefs about writing and collecting data rapidly. While results may differentiate between instructional programs (Rasinski and DeFord, 1986), this instrument limits the range of responses and

quality of data one can obtain. Much richer data result from individual interviews. Through questions, children's self-perceptions of their writing ability and conceptions of the writing process are clearly revealed (Fear, Anderson, Englert, and Raphael, 1987). Investigations of children's perceptions of the writing process have focused on specific age levels — prior to school entry, within the first years of instruction, and in the upper elementary grades — but few studies have compared children across the continuum. This study investigated elementary children's knowledge of the situational, procedural and functional aspects of writing across grade levels. The following questions were raised: Do children's definitions of writing differ across grade levels? How does children's knowledge of the functions of writing compare across grade levels? Are there differences in writing strategies used by children at each level? Do children's attitudes and interest in writing change from one grade level to the next?

Method

Subjects. The sample consisted of three grade levels groups — grades one and two ($n = 32$); grades three and four ($n = 32$); and grades five and six ($n = 32$) — for a total of 96 subjects. The number of boys and girls in each group were approximately equal. All of the children were enrolled in schools in western New York where the writing process had been implemented.

Materials. The 30-item Harlin-Lipa Writing Interview, developed by the researcher and a colleague, was used. Questions which tapped the children's attitudes toward writing, identified writing activities children engaged in at home and at school and outlined their understanding and viewpoints of the composing process were included.

Procedures. Each subject was individually interviewed by the researcher or a graduate student outside of

the classroom. The children's responses were recorded on the interview form; audiotape recordings of the interviews provided the opportunity to review responses for accuracy. The children were told that their answers would not be shared with their classroom teacher. Interviews were completed within 30 minutes.

Results

Each subject's responses to specific questions were listed. From individual responses, major categories of similar responses emerged. After responses in each category were tallied, the percentage of subjects responding similarly was calculated.

Interests and attitudes. In response to the question, *Do you like to write?* the children were very positive. The percentage of affirmative responses increased by grade level with grades one and two having 81%; grades 3 and 4, 84%; and grades five and six, 88%. However, the students were not as enthusiastic about being asked to write by their teacher. The percentage of students responding positively decreased; 63% for both grades one and two and grades three and four compared to 44% for grades five and six. Older students indicated that their feeling about writing depended upon the type and length of writing being requested. Only 3% expressed this reservation at grades one and two, while 16% of subjects in grades three and four and 38% in grades five and six gave this response.

When asked about the type of writing they like to do, all three groups preferred writing stories — grades one and two, 34%; three and four, 56%; and five and six, 69%. For grades one and two, letters to friends (20%) and factual text (9%) were the second and third highest responses. Poetry (19%) ranked second for grades three and four with adventure and science fiction (9%) ranked third. With the older

group, letters to friends (19%) and diaries (9%) were the second and third most popular choices.

If subjects were writing a book of their own, the choice of topic would vary. *Animals* were the number one topic choice for two groups — grades one and two, 31%; grades three and four, 34%; while *autobiography* ranked first among fifth and sixth grades (28%). *Sports* was the second choice for grades one and two (12%). Third and fourth graders indicated that *autobiography* (9%) would be their second choice. Fifth and sixth graders' second choices were equally divided among *humor*, 12%; *animals*, 12%; and *fairy tales*, 12%.

Knowledge about the writing process. During the interview, subjects were asked, *What is writing?* Responses reflecting surface and deep understanding of composition varied from group to group. Surface responses were most frequent among the first grade and second graders (79%), dropping to 50% for grades three and four; and 28% for grades five and six. The younger subjects' responses included spelling, making marks on paper, and printing. Older subjects defined writing as putting thoughts and ideas on paper, making sense, or a learning process. Students viewed writing as being more difficult than reading. This perception became stronger with the older students — grades one and two, 44%; three and four, 59%; and five and six, 69%. Most subjects were aware of the connection between the processes, indicating that writing did help you read. This was true for 78% of the subjects in first and second grades, 88% in third and fourth; and 84% in fifth and sixth. Children's perceptions of the easy and difficult aspects of writing are presented below. The interview questions and the total percentages of children's major responses are given in Table 1.

Table 1
Perceptions of Writing

	1 & 2 (N=32)	3 & 4 (N=32)	5 & 6 (N=32)
<i>What is the hardest part about writing?</i>			
Thinking of ideas	9	16	38
Getting ideas/thoughts on paper	22	12	30
Having enough time	—	3	—
Spelling	22	31	16
Writing neatly	16	11	—
Editing	3	—	12
<i>What is the easiest part about writing?</i>			
Thinking of ideas	22	31	16
Staying on topic	9	—	56
Writing final copy	3	3	3
Spelling	25	6	16
Writing neatly	19	28	—
Using punctuation	6	3	6

Do children's definitions of writing differ across grade levels? For younger children writing was defined by its surface features while older children regard writing as communication. These differences become more distinguishable when they identify the easiest and hardest parts about writing. The importance of thinking of and communicating ideas was reported more frequently for the oldest group than for the younger children as being the most difficult part of writing. The middle group, grades three and four, cited spelling as the difficult part of writing. Given their many experiences with first drafts on self-selected topics, it is not surprising that fifth and sixth grades rated staying on the topic the easiest part of the writing process. For the two young groups, concerns for spelling and neatness seem to be greater for some individuals than for others. Differences in each group's concept of the writing process is consistent with their views of good writers. While the younger children

Table 2
Perceptions of Writers

	1 & 2 (N=32)	3 & 4 (N=32)	5 & 6 (N=32)
<i>Who is a good writer in your class?</i>			
Self	25	12.5	12.5
Classmate	81	75	84
Teacher	6	12.5	6
<i>Does a good writer ever have difficulty?</i>			
Yes	34	59	53
No	59	28	34
Don't know	3	6	6
No response	3	9	3
<i>What does a good writer do?</i>			
Writes a lot/practices	22	16	6
Has good ideas	21	15	60
Uses humor	—	—	6
Writes neatly	25	28	19
Spells correctly	9	16	3
Uses punctuation	3	9	—
<i>What does your teacher think a good writer does?</i>			
Has good ideas	16	31	75
Practices	3	25	15
Concentrates/takes time	15	19	3
Writes neatly	34	22	12.5
Spells correctly	16	9	6
<i>How would you teach someone to write?</i>			
Show them how	19	9	12.5
Tell them to think	3	3	16
Write it for them	25	—	9
Teach them to write letters	38	59	63
Tell them to sound out words	3	6	12.5
Teach them to read first	3	3	6
Ask them to try it	3	6	—

viewed themselves as good writers more frequently than older children, the appreciation for their peers' efforts remained high across grade levels — an appreciation which may be a result of the sharing conferences which are inherent in process writing. Teachers were not rated highly as good writers. Perhaps their teachers do not share their writing frequently enough for students to be aware of its

quality or perhaps the subjects thought we understood that teachers had to be good writers in order to teach writing. Older children tended to view good writers more realistically than younger children. They understood that good writers frequently did have difficulty. It is likely that older students' experiences conferencing with both good and poor writers over time helped them recognize that all writers experience problems at some point. In defining the attributes of a good writer, older students judged the quality of writing on ideas; younger students defined good writers more often in terms of their spelling, and neatness. Older students' perceptions of good writers closely resembled what they believed their teachers valued — ideas rather than mechanics. Students' definitions of good writers and what constitutes good writing are presented in Table 2.

Strategies used in writing. Since the subjects were engaged in writing instruction which incorporated drafting, revising and editing, questions were posed to address their understanding of the strategies they used for each. Their responses to specific questions are presented in Table 3. One surprising finding of this study was that children from all three groups would revert to traditional methods in teaching others to write. Their responses included many more instances of emphasizing the mechanics of the process — letter formation and spelling than of helping the writer with ideas. The subjects may not have felt as confident in their ability to teach someone what they know about the process since they are still learning and refining it themselves. Instead, they would teach the things that are easy to teach.

As children gain experience in writing, how do their strategies change? In Table 3, we see that when writing unfamiliar words, students become less dependent on asking

Table 3
Perceptions of Writers

	1 & 2 (N=32)	3 & 4 (N=32)	5 & 6 (N=32)
<i>What do you do when you come to a word you don't know how to write?</i>			
Sound it out	63	31	19
Ask another student	25	28	28
Ask the teacher	44	50	19
Use the dictionary	6	25	69
Leave it blank/skip it and go on	3	9	9
Spell it the best way I can	6	22	31
<i>Do you ever change what you are writing?</i>			
Yes	84	94	100
No	16	3	-
No response	-	3	-
<i>How do you decide what to change?</i>			
If it doesn't make sense	12.5	41	47
If I don't like it	22	-	19
If I have another idea	22	28	28
If I'm rewriting and find mistakes	12.5	25	12
If the teacher tells me to change	9	-	9
If I read it over	6	22	22
<i>How do you know when your writing is finished?</i>			
When there are no more ideas to write	22	31	50
When I like it	12.5	9	3
When it makes sense	9	32	34
When it comes to an end	3	6	28
When I am tired	16	-	9
When it says "the end"	9	6	3
When the teacher tells us	-	3	-
<i>Why do we use punctuation?</i>			
Give expression/clarity/meaning	44	46	94
Complete a sentence	22	34	-
Know when to stop	19	12.5	-
Make it lively	-	-	9
Separate sentences	-	3	28

a teacher for help and rely more on their ability to spell phonetically, use a dictionary or attempt it the best way possible when drafting. Older students also were more likely to review their writing and make decisions about what to change based upon meaning and less upon correctness, similar to

Monahan's (1984) subjects. Older students judged a draft complete when they were out of ideas or when the piece came to a logical conclusion. Punctuation also indicated some sophistication — they use it to clarify meaning, liven up writing or separate sentences. As children have the opportunity to take control of their own writing, to revise, edit and publish, they develop a greater repertoire of strategies for each step of the process. These findings coincide with research by Moore (1989) and Stice and Bertrand (1987) which found that young writers experience greater independence as they are actively involved with the writing process and have the opportunity to interact with their peers.

Writing as a functional activity. Children have opportunities to write both at home and school. To ascertain what type of writing takes place in each setting, subjects were asked several questions. Responses and questions are shown in Table 4. Does the knowledge of writing as a functional activity change as children become older? From results on Table 4, we see that children continue to write at home regardless of their age. The differences are in where the writing takes place — older students appear to need more privacy (the bedroom) and do more personal writing in diaries and letters than do younger children. At home, writing serves several functions — lists to remember, letters to friends, stories, telephone numbers and notes. At school, assigned writing consumes a larger portion of the child's time and increases across subject areas as well. From their responses, children of all ages seem well aware of the variety of purposes writing affords in daily life. In general, the students' attitudes toward writing became more positive as their experiences with the writing process increased. Their interest in topics also diversified, with the family becoming less important over time. Older students with more life

experiences also considered themselves to be good subjects for books.

Table 4
Perceptions of Writers

	1 & 2	3 & 4	5 & 6
<i>Do you write at home?</i>			
Yes	100	100	100
No	—	—	—
<i>Where?</i>			
Bedroom	41	56	63
Desk	19	—	19
Kitchen	9	3	3
Dining room	3	3	3
Any quiet place	—	6	—
Library	—	6	—
<i>What do you write?</i>			
Letters to friends	47	75	72
Diary	12.5	6	19
Lists	59	69	91
Stories	44	28	28
Telephone numbers	75	78	88
Novel	—	—	3
Notes	12.5	3	16
<i>Do you write at school?</i>			
Yes	100	100	100
No	—	—	—
<i>What do you write?</i>			
Stories	41	28	41
Journals	12.5	3	25
Notes to friends	9	6	12
Telephone numbers	3	—	—
About books I've read	3	6	6
News	3	—	3
Assignments	59	41	66
Handwriting	6	12.5	—
<i>Do you write in--</i>			
Math?	66	88	78
Science?	66	91	100
Reading?	91	100	88
Spelling?	81	88	97

Perhaps this is a result of the feedback their peers and teachers provided as their journal entries and drafts were

shared. What can we learn about the impact of process writing as a result of the interviews? First, it becomes obvious that some aspects of the process are learned earlier than others but that with time children do come to understand the purpose of each step as they are engaged in it. Second, children need the opportunity to write for different audiences and purposes in order to become knowledgeable about the process. While some children have this opportunity at home, others may have to rely on the school setting to provide these experiences. Third, children do shift their focus from features of writing to the communicative features as long as their experiences across time consistently reinforce this view. Finally, teachers need to provide the model necessary for young children to understand the process by sharing their own writing frequently and by being consistent in their responses to young writers during conferences.

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Rebecca P. Harlin is a faculty member in the Department of Elementary Education and Reading at Buffalo State College, Buffalo New York. Sally E. Lipa is a faculty member in the School of Education at the State University of New York at Geneseo, Geneseo New York. The authors described their findings about teachers' perceptions of process writing in their article "Assessment: Insights into Teachers' Beliefs and Perceptions About Process Writing" in the previous issue of Reading Horizons, Volume 33, Issue 3.