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AUTHOR	Casey, Jean M.
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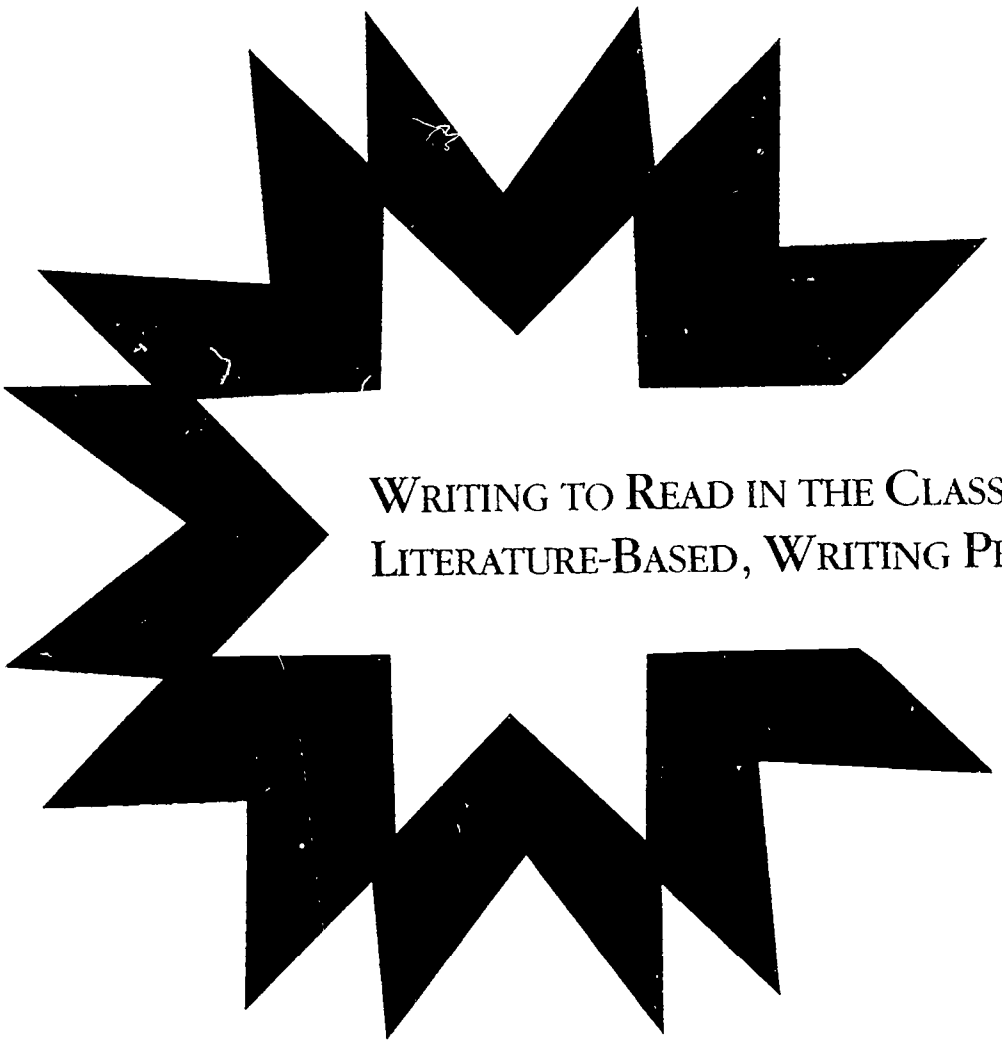
ABSTRACT

This booklet presents a qualitative evaluation of the Simi Star Project, which sought to demonstrate the use of a Writing to Read adaptation that supports a literature-based, whole language, writing process environment within kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. After a description of the questions that the evaluation asked, the booklet describes how the qualitative evaluation was developed. The booklet then presents the two major conclusions of the evaluation: (1) the most successful results occurred in school sites where the desire for the integration of technology in the classroom originated with the classroom teachers and the site administrator sharing their interest; and (2) all students averaged at least two writing levels higher than those in control classrooms. The paper concludes with answers to eight questions frequently asked by superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents. Eight bar graphs of data are included. (RS)

THE SIMI STAR EVALUATION OF

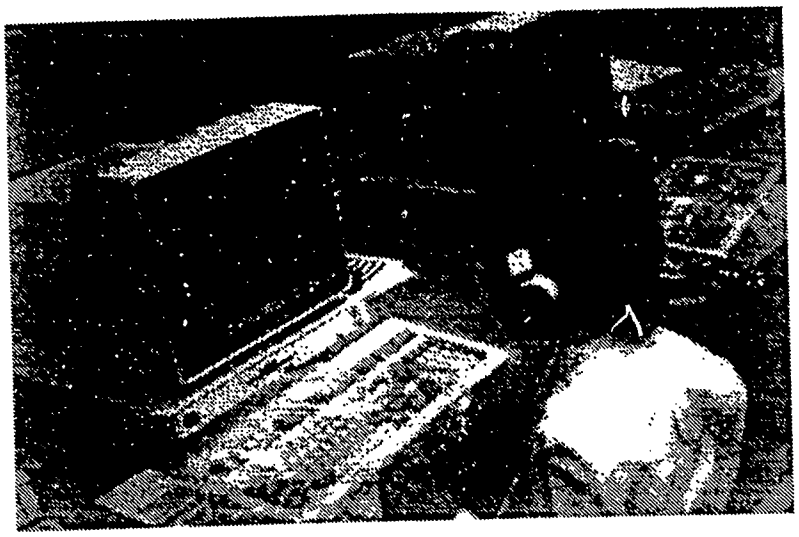


WRITING TO READ IN THE CLASSROOM
LITERATURE-BASED, WRITING PROCESS APPROACH

California State University, Long Beach

Six school districts; Simi Valley, Orcutt, Oxnard, Hueneme, Santa Barbara and Ventura joined in a technology partnership with IBM, in 1990. The first goal of this large scale project was to demonstrate the use of a Writing to Read adaptation that supports a literature-based, whole language, writing process environment within kindergarten and first grade classrooms. The second goal was to enhance teacher productivity and competence. A comprehensive teacher training model and telecommunications network was developed. Teachers received multiple workshops and then onsite support and telecommunications coaching for implementation. The third goal addressed a serious physical plant problem facing many school districts; lack of space. Placing the technology equipment directly into the classroom eliminates the need for separate space for computer labs. Networking the classroom computers provides freedom from disk swapping and access that allows young children to independently log on and use computers throughout the school day. This study compared WTR in the classroom with WTR in a lab setting and settings without computers in the classroom. The questions the study asked were:

"Does integrating technology into the classroom become a natural extension of the teaching methodology and a familiar, non-threatening tool available throughout the school day to students? How is the equity of technology use for all students an important issue for the schools? How can a qualitative evaluation approach give us better data on the effect of computers integrated in the classroom on students writing and reading progress?"



Writing to read is a language arts computer-based program designed to foster literacy development (writing and reading) of young children. The computer is used to both individualize instruction so that children can work at their own pace and also create a new classroom milieu including computers for cooperative group, writing collaboration among students. According to Cynthia Greenleaf in a recent report from the Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy:

"Computers do not function as independent variables in classrooms, but rather as part of a complex network of social and pedagogical interactions" ("Technological Indeterminancy: The Role of Classroom Writing Practices in Shaping Computer Use, " Technical Report #57, January 1992).

The issue is not whether computers can be used effectively. The issue is how. This study seeks to show how teachers can best take advantage of the power and flexibility of computers to enhance student learning in their classrooms.

The Simi Star Evaluation Project

The evaluation of the Simi Star Project was led by Dr. Jean M. Casey, Associate Professor of Reading/Language Arts, California State University, Long Beach; Ellen Lee, Asst. Supt. of Curriculum Simi Valley School District, Sherrie Kolz, IBM Education Instructional Specialist, six principals and 36 teachers and coordinators in the school districts.

This evaluation was the first qualitative evaluation of the Writing to Read program in the classroom. In order to determine the effectiveness of the WTR program in developing literacy skills of kindergarten and first grade students, a two-group experimental design was employed. To insure a valid comparison of the effects of the WTR program with current instructional practices, both the experimental and control groups were selected from the same school districts.

A qualitative evaluation plan modeled after Dr. Casey's Descriptive Study of the ABC School District reading program and Dr. John Goodlad's national study of schools was developed. Instruments for evaluation included: Observations in the classroom, pre and post reading attitude surveys, year long portfolios of writing samples, teacher questionnaires, parent questionnaires, administrator interview and questionnaire, student interviews, teacher and administrator journals. Qualitative data was compiled in anecdotal record form. Results from interviews, questionnaires and journal reports were presented in percentages. 1000 writing samples were scored using a holistic rubric scale.

Training

Training was a vital part of this project. Lack of sufficient training is one of the biggest areas of failure in the implementation of technology in the schools.

Major Conclusions

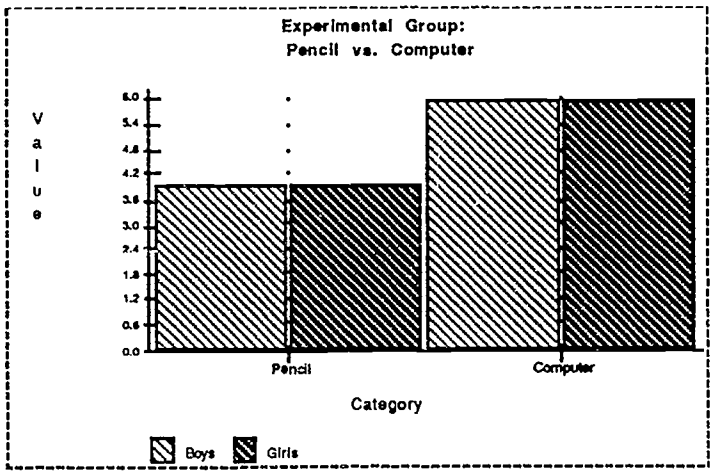
Conclusion 1: The most successful results occurred in school sites where the desire for the integration of technology in the classroom originated with the classroom teachers and the site administrator shared their interest and desire to participate in this program. The elements of teacher and administrator expectation, enthusiasm and interest and support for a program are vital elements in the success of any school innovation.

Conclusion 2: Over 1,000 writing portfolios were collected from K-1-2 students representing 29 classrooms in 6 school districts. Included in the population were several Spanish language classrooms, ESL classrooms and classrooms with Learning Handicapped students.

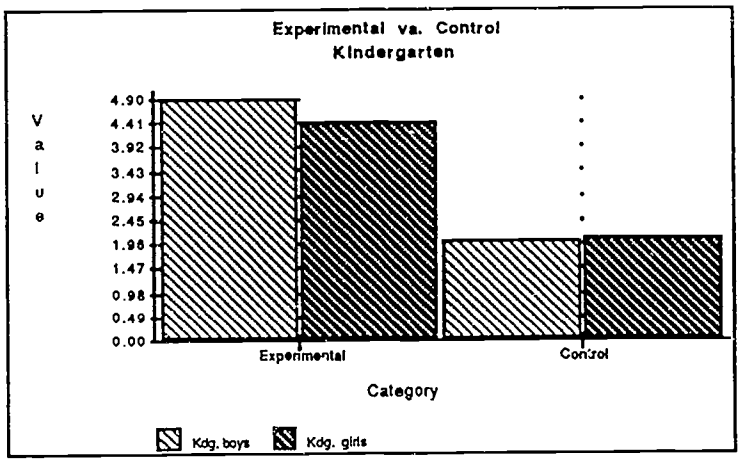
All students in the experimental Writing to Read in the Classroom program averaged at least two writing levels higher then those in the control classrooms, the experimental group had a significantly higher positive reading attitude than the control group. All students were included in the study and those identified ESL, LD, A.D.D., Gifted, achieved the same benefits from the program as did other students. Equity of technology use was provided for all.

The Criteria for Scoring Writing Samples was based on an adapted version of the holistic rubric used by Educational Testing Service in the national WTR evaluation. It covers 8 levels of scoring for writing samples starting with blank, pre-writing and then six levels of writing proficiency with descriptions of benchmarks for each level. Teachers were trained on the use of holistic scoring. Samples were gathers from the experimental group of writings done with pencil as well as on the computer. The control group since they had no computer access responded by pencil only.

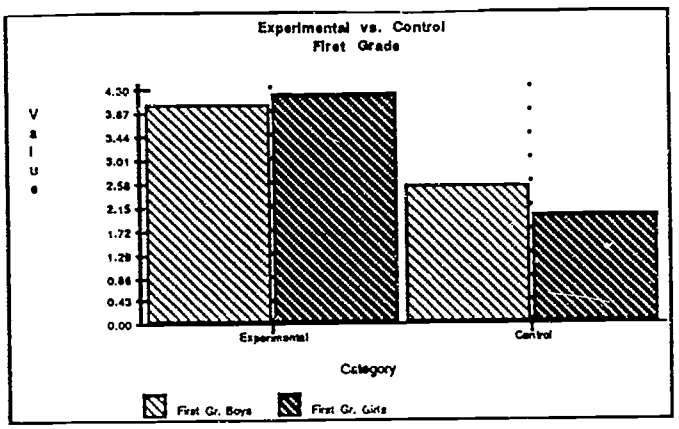
Results of writing on computer vs. with pencil.



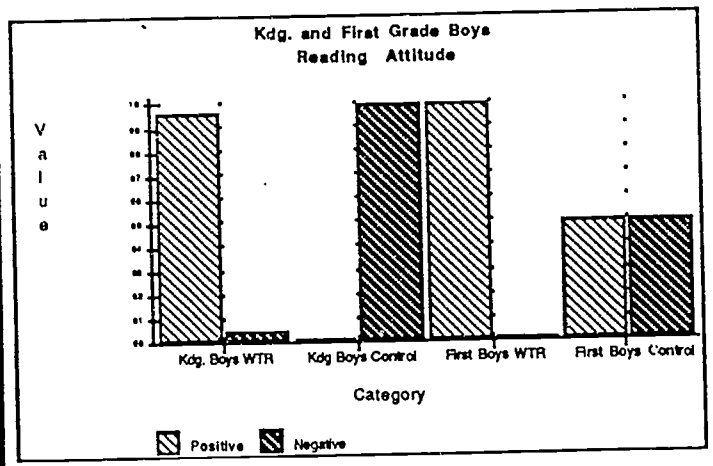
Results of kindergarten writing experimental vs control boys vs girls.

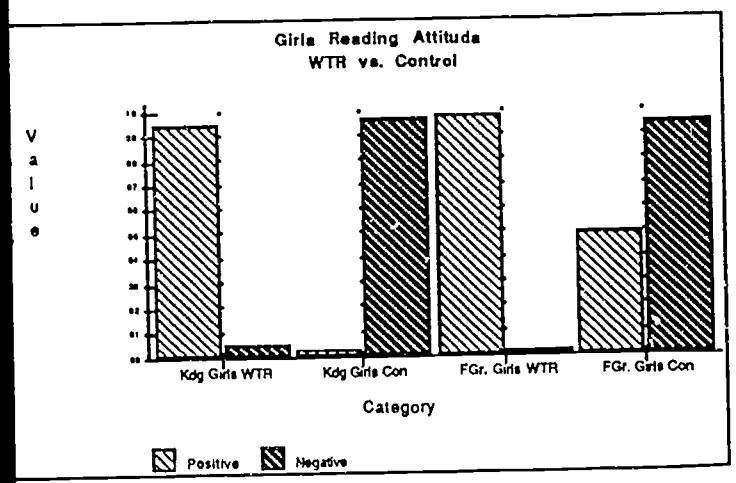


Results of first grade writing experimental vs control boys vs girls



Reading Attitude is by far the greatest positive effective computers have in the classroom. All experimental students far exceeded controls in this area.





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Questions frequently asked by Superintendents, Principals, Teachers and Parents:

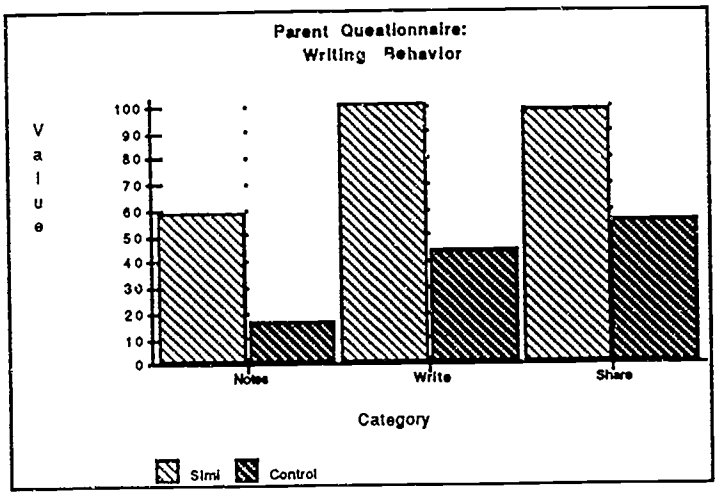
How valid is holistic scoring and qualitative research? Holistic scoring has been used by the State of California in the CAP test since 1985. National assessment reports encourage educators to use this type assessment. In a qualitative study such as this we were able to measure writing growth through assessing 1000 writing portfolios using a holistic rubric for scoring writing samples. We also were able to measure attitudes and behavior through questionnaires and observations. The elements of empowerment and student self-esteem that are an important part of computer integration have been missed by prior research that focused on standardized test reading scores alone. Positive reading attitudes as well as double the amount of writing growth was uncovered and validated in this benchmark study. Future studies such as this one should be conducted in our school settings to measure, describe, and validate implementation of technology in the classroom.

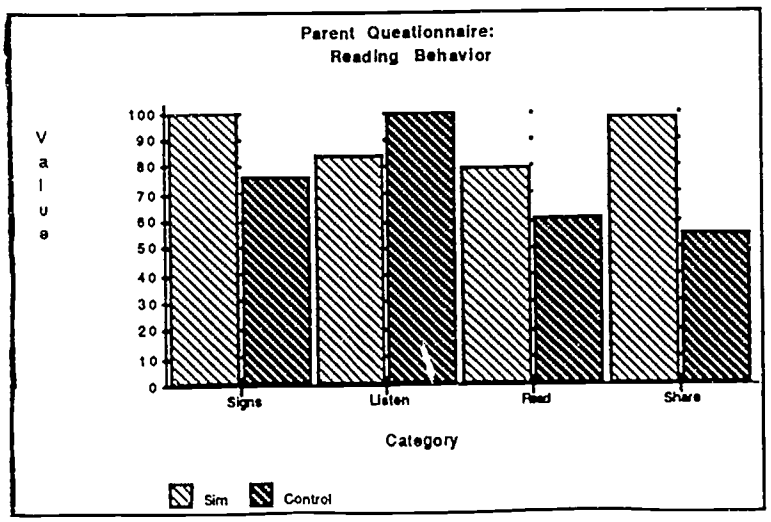
When will my child transition to book spelling? The average Writing to Read first grader had improved four levels of writing proficiency bringing most of them into transition to book spelling.

What do parents think of this program?

Parents in the WTR experimental classrooms gave a 95% rating of how much they liked the program and their children liked it. They gave a 99% rating on knowing about how this program taught their child reading and writing. In the control groups over 50% of parents had no idea what program of reading or writing was being used in the classroom.

Parents in the WTR samples reported significantly higher evidence of writing and reading behaviors their child demonstrated at home than parents in the control group. Twice as many students in the WTR program wrote stories at home and three times as many WTR students wrote notes at home, so both observable reading and writing behavior were significantly enhanced. Actual changed literacy behavior in the home environment is a much more powerful indicator of literacy development then a score on a standardized test. Educators should include ongoing parent evaluation of their child's literacy growth in the home environment.





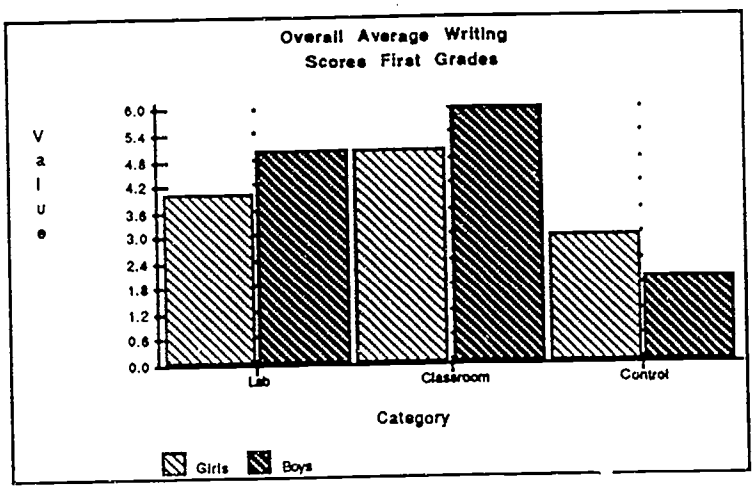
Of course this works for the average child but my child is said to have attention deficit disorder, how can it help him? Experimental classrooms with A.D.D. children reported they were doing high level writing due the the ease of use of computer as opposed to the struggle of using a pencil, and had a positive attention span during their time on the computer. Computer use seems to be a highly successful intervention for students labeled A.D.D., dyslexic and other learning disorders. Further research needs to be conducted specifically on the effect of computers for empowering these learners.

My child is learning English as a second language, how can it help her? The Spanish experimental classrooms had many striking examples of ESL students empowered by computer use. One fourth grade student non-English speaker from Mexico learned English well enough in six months to become the computer monitor in his fourth grade class. The principal reported that this boy turned from a high risk student to a leader in the fourth grade due to this computer program in the classroom.

"What do teachers think of Writing to Read in the Classroom with Stories and More Multimedia software?" The combined experience of the teachers involved in the experimental study was 438 years or an average of 18 years per teacher. Teachers rated the overall program 4.14 on a 5 point scale with 4 being liked it and 5 being liked it very much. Teachers reported they felt that this program improved the students writing and reading significantly and reported they had now made computers an integral part of their classroom. One teacher summed up all of their feelings perfectly when she said, "How terrible it would be to be forced to go back to teaching without computers!"

"What did principals think of this program?" Principals reported 75%-100% integration of computers in all K-1 classrooms. They felt the most positive results were for their students and their teachers in providing a risk-free environment for learning within classrooms. They were proud of the success they

How did Writing to Read in the Classroom compare with WTR in a lab and the control classrooms with no computers or WTR?
Boys and girls in the Writing to Read in the classroom experimental groups were writing at higher levels than the boys and girls in the WTR lab or control groups. However the WTR lab students wrote at higher levels than the traditional classroom control group.



"Even though this is my first child in school, I know she is ahead in reading and writing ability due to this outstanding program! In kindergarten she came home and read to me, I had no idea she could read, and it's just progressed from there--the sky's the limit and she's able to express in writing whatever she feels! We feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to be in the WTR program!" Kindergarten Parent Nightengale School.

School Districts involved in Simi Star Project

Simi Valley Unified
Justin Elementary
Crestview Elementary
Orcutt Unified
Nightengale School
Hueneme School District
Williams School
Haycock School
Ventura School District
Loma Vista School
Portola School
Oxnard School District
Juanita School
Harrington School
Santa Barbara School District
Franklin School

For further information on replication of this project or the materials used in this newly developed implementation of Writing to Read for the classroom contact:

Jean M. Casey, Ph.D.
Associate Professor Reading/Language Arts
California State University, Long Beach
1250 Bellflower Blvd.
Long Beach, CA 90840
310-985-5795