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## New Writing Assessments: The Challenge of Changing Teachers' Beliefs About Students as Writers

**N**EW WRITING ASSESSMENTS are built on the belief that young children learning to write are engaged in making meaning. As Dyson (in press) has taught us, children create a written world surrounded by talk, drama, and drawing—a world that combines their “symbolic resources and social intentions,” a world that often foregrounds the micropolitics of their classroom situations including gender, race, or class. Thus, as evaluations of the writing of children, new assessments capture the ways young writers express themselves to multiple audiences through a variety of genres for multiple purposes, manipulate language to achieve particular effects, and respect the abundant variety in language use and dialect across diverse groups.

In this article, we suggest that these new assessments will be utilized effectively by teachers and children only if teachers understand their contents and purposes and agree to endorse and embrace them. When teachers assess students' growth as writers, they ask themselves, “Where has this child been?” “Where is she now?” and “Where can I advise her to go next?” Answers to these questions require a teacher's commitment to assessments that honor young authors' efforts to make their own meaning. To accomplish this, teachers

must validate language variety and stretch children to new genres and styles as well as clarity and creativity of expression. This requires a discerning eye and a willingness to engage with children in constructive criticism about their writing. In this view, a teacher's “assessments” become a reader's “analytic response to text” (D.P. Wolf, 1993; D.P. Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991; S.A. Wolf & Gearhart, 1993a, 1993b).

In the sections that follow, we examine ways that elementary teachers' beliefs about their students as writers mediate their acceptance and investment in new methods of assessing students' narrative writing. Our findings emerged from a 2-year collaboration with the teachers of one elementary school. While our venture resulted in considerable growth among teachers, we encountered some resistance as well, resistance engendered by our hesitancy to address deep issues about the philosophic foundations that undergird teachers'—and our own—current practices.

We begin with a description of the writing assessments we created in collaboration with the teachers of one elementary school, through a program entitled Writing What You Read (WWYR). Next, we explore where the teachers were prior to the onset of WWYR and then describe the overall impact of WWYR on classroom practice.<sup>1</sup> We then turn to two teachers who represent case examples of resistance and explore the quite varying reasons

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for their rejection. We conclude with remarks about what we have learned about new assessments in conflict with differing philosophies.

### **The WWYR Program**

Young authors are often encouraged to write about life experiences and the life of their individual imaginations and then to analyze the effectiveness of their written expressions. “Write what you know” is the advice often given to novice writers, encouraging them to take what they know about life and put it on paper. Yet professional writers, including numerous children’s authors, seem to suggest alternative advice—“Write what you read”—implying that writers are often inspired by what they know about literature.

Learning about literature was one key feature in the first year of the Writing What You Read professional development program. Following the participating teachers’ request to focus on narrative, we began by asking teachers to analyze literature in terms of the following narrative components: genre, theme, character, setting, plot, point of view, style, and tone. Teachers read sections of Atwell’s (1987) *In the Middle* and Lukens’ (1990) *A Critical Handbook of Children’s Literature*, and we drew on additional articles and books in the areas of children’s literature and literary criticism (e.g., Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987; Lurie, 1990; Sloan, 1991; S.A. Wolf & Heath, 1992). We also examined curricular materials crafted to highlight the critical features of narrative and the connections among literary texts, topics, and themes.

Learning about children as writers was a second key component of our first-year program. We provided numerous examples of young children writing their own stories as well as analyzing narratives. We discussed children’s oral insights and written work in the same way that we examined professional texts, stressing children’s developing understandings of character revelation, the symbolic use of setting, the often sequential nature of plot, and the explicit and implicit revelation of theme. We analyzed children’s beginning and more accomplished uses of language to set a tone and to create their own voice or style. We evaluated children’s awareness of audience, delineating what attempts children made to make their writing clear to others.

We also stressed that indices of children’s development could not be readily equated to “grade-level expectations”—that very young writers were quite capable of more accomplished pieces than older students, depending on their purpose and experience. We emphasized that children are interested in criticism that would help them become better writers—encouraging the teachers to think of a developmental model that would scaffold children toward stronger writing through specific commendations and recommendations.

Teachers’ understandings of the components of narrative and their students as writers then became the motivation for integrating curricular possibilities, instructional techniques, and assessment tools. Our goal was to help teachers assess children’s narrative writing in the same way that they critically respond to literature. Our hope was that teachers could offer their students explicit guidance, equipped now with the “tools of the literary trade”—an understanding of genre influences, the technical vocabulary, and the orchestration of the narrative components of a text—within a framework designed to strengthen young children’s writing.


Together we developed two tools to support teachers in narrative assessment—a narrative feedback form to assist teacher-student conferences (Figure 1) and a narrative rubric to help teachers evaluate students’ present understandings and future possibilities (Figure 2). Year 2 focused heavily on practice and implementation of these methods.

### **Teachers’ Beliefs Prior to WWYR**


When we began our workshops, we found that the majority of teachers assumed their students lacked knowledge necessary to competent writing. Writing in the classroom was viewed in one of two ways—as an opportunity to express and develop creative imagination (a belief that limited the teacher’s role for fear of restricting the child’s expression) or as an opportunity to practice and master composition skills (a belief that motivated a sequential, stepping-stone curriculum). Patterns of belief were associated with grade level.

The primary teachers had a tendency to work from a readiness model and a skills view of writing (cf. Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Sulzby, 1991). Because the kindergarten teachers believed their students were not ready for writing skills, the

**WWYR Narrative Feedback Form**



*Heart of the Story*

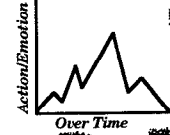



*Theme*

*Setting*

*Character*

*Plot*





*Communication*

audience awareness \_\_\_\_\_  
style \_\_\_\_\_  
tone \_\_\_\_\_

*Convention:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Writing Process:* \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Genre: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Wolf & Gearhart

Figure 1. Narrative Feedback Form.

only writings assigned were stories children dictated to their parents at home—stories that received no critical evaluation from the teachers. The first-grade teachers did not give their students opportunities for “real writing” until after January, when they thought the children were “ready to write.” There was initially no mention of young children needing to write for meaning; most first grade writing projects were handled as exercises with prescribed story starters and fill-in-the-blank pattern books.

In this context, assessment could not possibly have the function of enhancing children’s efforts with meaning making. Indeed, there was a common assumption—linked to the skills view—that children could not write and would not want to write without the teacher’s warm, uncritical acceptance to ensure a child’s interest and imagination. Thus, viewing their role as one of praise and motivation, the primary teachers did not evaluate their children’s writing, and their comments reflect this point of view: “Any attempts with the written word receive praise and encouragement.” “I want the child to truly like to write.”

At higher grade levels, we found a juxtaposition between the teachers’ concerns with creative voice and with skill. Teachers might assign narratives on specific topics (usually associated with heroes and holidays) guided by explicit criteria, or they might provide time for opportunities to “just write”: “I want children to express themselves in a way that does justice to what they imagine and think, to find the words.” “I want children to see relationships between their thoughts and words.”

Still, the teachers did not understand ways of helping children enhance these relationships. They were not particularly explicit in their analyses of narrative and, not wanting to stifle creativity, they tended to avoid giving advice on content, focusing their assessment feedback mostly on convention or genre-general characteristics such as the importance of a clear “beginning, middle, and end.”

Upper-grade teachers represented a departure from a focus on the child’s expressive imagination toward detailed assignment-specific expectations. A good story had a “beginning, middle, and end/conclusion; stays to the point; lots of detail; at least two paragraphs; complete sentences; [no] run-on sentences; [no] rambling; proper punctuation;

neat; completed all parts of the assignment.” With assessment criteria such as these, upper-grade teachers conveyed a traditional view of students not as makers of meaning but as compliant learners.

### **The Impact of WWYR**

Year 1 represented the more intensive focus on children as writers, and its impact was evident by the end of the year. We were heartened that many teachers reported a shift in focus away from skill mastery toward the making of meaning through narrative (“I don’t [just] correct the convention. I have begun to ask questions to get them to think of ways to improve writing.”). Kindergarten teachers expressed interest in facilitating more opportunities for “letting them tell stories.”

Teachers at all grade levels reported really reading and listening to their children’s stories (“I’ve enjoyed children’s writing.”) and building instruction on children’s spontaneous interests and understandings of literature (“I’m now beginning to have the students look for and share their favorite phrases from the literature we read and tell us why it appeals to them.”). Many teachers were beginning to recognize students as authors, a change that had potential to support assessment as a reader’s response.

However, that potential was limited by complaints that WWYR may be “too sophisticated,” and the apparent source of those complaints was the belief that students could not analyze narrative in the ways we were recommending: “We still have a problem with [theme] in class; they tend to think every theme is friendship.” “Trying to explain plot to my kids is often difficult.” “Some miss the point completely.” Kindergarten and some primary teachers were particularly likely to distance themselves from the relevance of our program, and they wished for a focus just on their grade levels.

During year 2, we focused our workshops intensively on methods of assessment. Perhaps because we had far less time to share, celebrate, and criticize students’ writing, the patterns of impact on teachers’ beliefs were little different from the first year. Again we found some teachers delighted with their students’ writing (“I was just so impressed with what they had come with [portfolios from the prior year] and how much better their writing had gotten.”) and surprised by their students’ positive



Figure 2. Narrative Rubric.

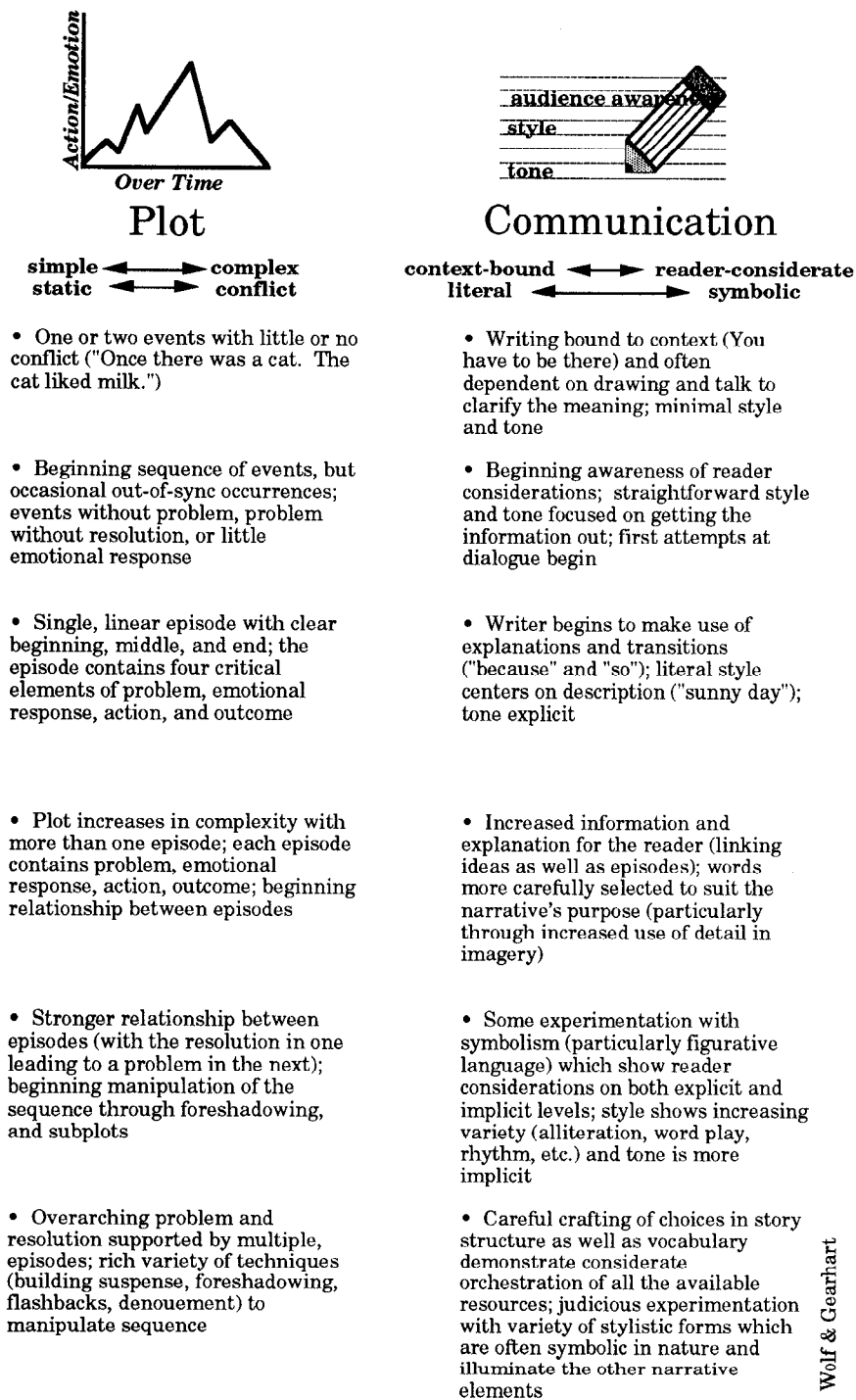


Figure 2. (cont.) Narrative Rubric.

attitudes toward writing (“We talked about what was our favorite part of the year, and . . . a great many students said *writing* was! . . . It wasn’t as much of a chore for them as I thought it was!”).

In this context, more teachers expressed awareness that children can handle explicit feedback (“and then children want to fix it right away, and they go away happy and wanting to change, they’re very eager to go back and write.”). Indeed, at this point, some teachers were actively confronting ways that their prior assessment practices had emphasized incompetence, rather than competence: “I need to be able to see a lot more positive things from the students and not always think about the best student and evaluate from top down.”

But the pattern of mixed impact persisted, as some teachers continued to raise concerns about their students’ capacities as writers: “Weaving a good story is beyond them.” “They don’t have a clue on what revision is all about.” “There isn’t that much that [third graders] accomplish in a year’s time that you could measure.” Their deep beliefs in either a “skills” view or a “creative writing” view were the two predominant counters to the WWYR approach to assessment.

On the one hand, the teachers invested in skills either rejected WWYR for its irrelevance or suggested revisions of WWYR assessments that fit a “scope and sequence” analysis of writing growth. Thus the first quote illustrates a primary teacher’s worries about time lost to teaching writing skills.

Spending so much time and attention to the rubric and the feedback form . . . I actually did less writing than I normally would have done. . . . [Now] they don’t even know how to write a sentence. (2nd-grade teacher, 6/11/93)

In her view, the purpose of a “writing” program is to provide students opportunities to practice composing grammatical sentences, and therefore WWYR is limited in its relevance. The second quote illustrates a revisionist position grounded in a deep commitment to a skills view of writing development:

I think that [WWYR should have] some type of structure so that . . . in first grade . . . you would lay out what the narrative should contain—a simple plot, a simple scene, no more than two characters, and then, the next year, you would take one of those and develop it further, maybe the third year you’d put dialogue in, so you’re following the sequence down the line. (1st-grade teacher, 7/2/93)

On the other hand, the teachers invested in “creative writing” felt that WWYR’s analytic emphasis violated their understandings of whole language, writing process approaches. Our substantive focus on narrative content was viewed as inconsistent with a child-centered classroom. When some teachers planned a narrative assignment or had specific criticisms of children’s writing, they felt guilty about restraining the freedom of the child.

When I read Graves [1983] and Atwell [1987] . . . they say . . . when we assign a topic to the children, we’re still making them dependent upon us as writers. [On the other hand], you cannot draw from an empty well. If you don’t give the child something to draw from, then all they do is pull from their own limited experience. And yet, there has to be time when what’s important to them is what they’re writing about rather than the assigned topic. . . . So do we have two *different* writing [methods]? . . . It is overwhelming. (5th-grade teacher, 6/30/93)

This teacher is ambivalent, worried that constructive assessment may silence children’s voices.

### Case Examples

We have selected two cases that represent patterns of resistance to WWYR founded on beliefs about students as writers. Neither case is typical of our 16 teachers. Indeed, as we report elsewhere (Gearhart, Wolf, Burkey, & Whittaker, 1994), there were teachers whose knowledge, beliefs, and practice were deeply and positively impacted by their involvement with WWYR. The cases below, however, serve to highlight two persistent philosophical orientations that would not be moved in the face of new assessments. Although both teachers, Bert and Peter (the names are pseudonyms), gave a polite nod to our program, their firmly-held beliefs were not swayed by the methods we used.

#### Bert

An experienced teacher new to the primary level, Bert tended to follow the lead of his grade-level colleague in planning narrative units and utilizing methods of narrative assessment. Less knowledgeable about narrative than his partner, Bert was able to make minor use of some of the WWYR materials we distributed, such as “the [guide]book . . . that’s helpful,” but, for the most part, the materials seemed overwhelming to him: “There seems to be so much coming at you, you

really have limited time to touch base with resource materials.”

Bert’s comments about writing assessment in early workshops led us to believe that he did not see children as capable authors (“I used to ask older kids things. But with the primary grade I don’t.”). In year 2, we noted changes in his understandings of the developmental nature of children’s writing. He learned that children were capable of handling theme, particularly if it was explicitly discussed in class. Thus, with regard to the *Frog and Toad* unit he and his colleague designed (Lobel, 1971, 1979), Bert said, “The kids understood the theme of friendship. It was something that they could easily write down and identify with.”

Nevertheless, Bert’s emphasis on “simpler” and “basic” curriculum for primary children did not change, as he conveys in his reflections on the irrelevance of the WWYR rubric.

As we practice grading other papers, you know, I scratch my head and say, “I’m kinda glad I’m in the [primary] grade ’cause it’s pretty basic and it’s pretty simple . . .” So I keep it kinda simple and don’t feel like I need to, you know, refer to the rubric so much. (Bert, 1st-grade teacher, 6/14/93)

With this rationale, he departed from his colleague by providing his students with a simpler version of the WWYR assessment materials. When his students planned their stories, they used a form that included four components (theme, plot, character, setting) but omitted the communication circle in the center of the form.

When I’m talking with first graders, and they’re beginning to write for the first time in January or February . . . it just seemed to be a simpler approach, for what I was trying to do with kids who were writing for the first time. (6/14/93)

Comparing the remaining four components to the children’s familiar game of four-square, Bert felt that the communication circle in the form was too complex for his students. By removing the communication circle—which encompassed the necessary writing tools of style, tone, and audience awareness—he virtually eliminated attention to language. He felt strongly that while first graders could write a brief plot, with two characters in a limited setting with a minimal theme, they could not manipulate language for particular effects.

Overall Bert’s attitude represents his determination to simplify materials for younger chil-

dren. He had little faith in his students’ abilities to become accomplished writers.

### Peter

Peter was an upper grade teacher who joined the faculty and the WWYR project in the second year. Peter’s resistance to WWYR derived from multiple sources—his limited understandings of narrative, his commitment to “creative” writing, and his beliefs that his students’ capacities were limited.

Uncomfortable with the analytical WWYR workshop conversations, he commented that the workshops were the most “intellectual” experiences he had ever had concerning text. His own difficulties with the material were linked to his beliefs that his students had comparable difficulties. Peter felt, for example, that the subtle devices of motivation and intention were unavailable to his children.

These stories that I’m reading [to the students] are not just telling of events, but there is a plot to it, and there is a theme to it, and I think kids don’t really do that, at least not the ones that I have worked with. (Peter, 6th-grade teacher, 6/5/93)

His students, he felt, saw writing as an assignment to finish rather than a meaning to be communicated: “They didn’t quite grasp theme. . . . They just wanted to write it and finish it and turn it in and get it graded and be done.” We heard much from Peter about what his students could not do.

Perhaps because he viewed the “technical” aspects of writing to be beyond his students’ capacities, Peter was resistant to the critical stance we asked teachers to take in their assessments of students’ writing, believing that a teacher should not tamper with a child’s personal writing process. He believed many children cannot handle specific feedback.

Last year, I had this one girl. She just—the blood would just drain out of her face. It was really painful for me, ’cause she was one of the most rambling writers I ever encountered and she needed a lot of help. But she couldn’t handle . . . the criticism. So, for me, it was more of an issue of helping her with that issue alone, rather than even with the writing. (6/5/93)

Prior to being introduced to WWYR, Peter’s teaching reflected a particularly open-ended view of process writing, which emphasized that children’s writing was sacrosanct and not to be criticized by



the teacher. Thus, in his teaching, Peter was most concerned with enhancing his students' creativity. He labeled himself a "writing process" teacher, and felt that a major part of the process was "allowing [children] to write whatever they feel like writing, and then guiding each individual child along, in terms of where they are with their writing."

But Peter's guidance was limited both by his lack of knowledge about narrative and his strong aversion to giving any assessment feedback at all. Because Peter focused on the negative aspects of criticism, he could not see the role of constructive criticism in helping to build a student's confidence.

Peter's differentiation of creativity from criticism represents a novice approach to central ideas in process writing. The purpose of any kind of conferencing, whether with the teacher or with peers, is to hold a conversation about the effectiveness of the writing—to compliment and question different choices, to encourage an expansion of the writer's vision. By avoiding attention to criticism, Peter set up an atmosphere for "anything goes"—an atmosphere that may serve to make children feel more comfortable for a while, but one that will not support a writer's growth in developing new styles, genres, and audiences in the future.

### Unexamined Beliefs

In the past 2 decades, teachers in the writing classroom have shifted from a concern for convention to an emphasis on communication and making meaning (Atwell, 1987; Dyson & Freedman, 1991). Through the workshops they attend and the reading they do, teachers are becoming more and more knowledgeable about a new view of writing as a process to be supported rather than a final product to be achieved. Still, the gap between awareness of new writing reforms and the ability to implement the reforms is large, and there is many a slip between the cup of knowledge and the lip of belief. In this article, we have examined the slips between the knowledge about narrative writing that we offered and the beliefs of teachers about their students' capacities by demonstrating how elementary teachers' beliefs about their students as writers mediate their acceptance and investment in new methods of assessing students' narrative writing.

While teachers in our study grew demonstrably in their competencies with narrative assess-

ment, their growth was most typically marked by only partial alignment with a fundamental tenet of WWYR that children are eager to "make meaning" through narrative and will make use of the insights of a thoughtful reader. Not every teacher was ready and able to embrace a developmental approach that veered from a sequential step-by-step vision. Teachers might be charmed by their students' writing, excited by their students' growth, and eager for more involvement and opportunities for response to children's work, but otherwise daunted by our requests for substantive critique. Even as they commented on growth and shared with pride examples of their students' stories, they complained about what their students could not understand and accomplish. We regard this attitude of complaint and negativity as a failing of our inservice methods. Teachers held beliefs that we did not attempt to unsettle directly.

One unexamined belief was that writing is a set of skills that can be charted hierarchically and should be taught and assessed sequentially. Skills are seen as discrete and dichotomous in nature—a child has either mastered them (e.g., writing a complete sentence) or not, and, if not, it is the teacher's job to ensure mastery. This belief provided a basis for rejecting WWYR's views of narrative (as beyond most students' level of maturity) and of pedagogy (as presuming a voice that the child does not yet possess).

A second unexamined belief was that teachers tended to perceive criticism as a way of silencing children. In our work, we had advocated for constructive criticism as an opportunity for children to develop a creative voice, and we did not recognize that teachers might perceive criticism as negative. Even though *we* were convinced, we had not persuaded some teachers that criticism is a way of expanding children's voices and helping them to find new genres and styles in which to express themselves. To be sure, creativity is vital in writing, but there is little creativity without dialogue, communication, and collaboration. Assessment is critical.

As Bakhtin's work demonstrates, "Meaning is always a function of at least two consciousnesses. Thus, texts are always shared" (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 151). To share a text does not mean to look at it and put a smiley face or a quick

compliment at the top of the page (“Good work!”). To share a text means to value the work with substantive attention, to ask questions, to push the metaphors, and to guide the writing.

In hindsight, we recognize that we were much like some of the teachers in our study, equally guilty in our failure to offer sound criticism. We were so eager to have the teachers feel comfortable with new assessments that we failed to question their long-held beliefs about what children could not do and what children could not tolerate. When we shared examples of children’s writing with the intention of countering the teachers’ focus on children’s limited competence, we left unchallenged the teachers’ belief that the writing we displayed was from exceptionally gifted children. Nor did we question specific practices—such as designating the home as the context for kindergartners’ dictated stories and reserving the classroom for the teaching of skills—and as a result, teachers felt validated in continuing such practices.

To counter teachers’ beliefs that students lack both skill and voice, as well as to improve our own inservice practices with new assessments, we would make three changes. First, we would create a primary focus to allow us to share what is known about the development of very young writers and to address squarely the tendencies of primary teachers to see WWYR as irrelevant to their students.

Second, for teachers of all grade levels, we would ask teachers to develop cases of their students as writers. Teachers could share their students’ writing and tell stories about their students as young authors. Videotapes of children’s engagement with their work, peers, parents, and teachers could provide memorable images of children’s eagerness to compose, share their work with others, and respond to critique.

Third, we would model effective conferencing, either directly with children in their classrooms or through videotapes of teachers holding productive assessment conferences. These models would serve to demonstrate the validating and growth-nurturing powers of criticism, as opposed to a more negative view.

## Conclusion

The art of excellent teaching often lies in the balance between comfort and challenge—how to

help our students feel comfortable with new ideas and simultaneously challenge them to reflect on and extend their accomplishments. This is particularly true in writing, for as students are invited in to the substantive work of making meaning, they need an atmosphere that will endorse their risks as well as encourage them to expand their meanings. The same is true in helping teachers come to new methods of teaching writing.

In our own work to increase teachers’ knowledge of current ideas in the curriculum, instruction, and assessment of writing, we did not sufficiently address teachers’ beliefs—their convictions about what children and their teachers can and cannot do. In the balance between comfort and challenge, we tipped the scales too often in favor of comfort.

Thus, in our criticisms of our work—often the product of extended discussions between ourselves as well as insights from our teachers in final interviews and follow-up conversations—we have come to discover that there are no crystal ball secrets for the future success of new assessments. In Lloyd Alexander’s (1992) humorous tale, *The Fortune Tellers*, a young man asks if he will have a long life. The old seer gazes into his crystal and replies, “The longest. . . . Only one thing might cut it short: an early demise.”

Will it be the case that new assessments are destined to be short lived? Certainly, such a prediction is not unnecessarily dire considering the early death of the California Learning Assessment System (McDonnell, 1996). However, we are hopeful that the lessons learned here and elsewhere will serve to help those who are attempting to “build assessments toward which [we] want educators to teach” (Resnick & Resnick, 1992, p. 59). Life, as the fortune-teller intimates, is what you make it—“You shall wed your true love if you find her and she agrees.” To secure such agreement in our work to develop and implement new assessments, we must make our conversations with teachers open to criticism as well as collaboration.

## Notes

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1. In prior reports, we have described our program in detail, reported on its impact on teachers' understandings of narrative genre, and analyzed the role of this knowledge in teachers' capacities to interpret and score children's writing in meaningful ways (Baker, Gearhart, Herman, Tierney, & Whittaker, 1991; Gearhart, Herman, Novak, & Wolf, 1995; Gearhart & Wolf, 1994; Gearhart, Wolf, Burkey, & Whittaker, 1994; Herman, Gearhart, & Baker, 1993; S.A. Wolf & Gearhart, 1993a, 1993b, 1994).

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