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IBM'S WRITING TO READ PROGRAM: ONE TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

Gail Parshall

"The station I like best is here with you." That's what one of my children wrote to me at the Writing Station, a part of IBM's computer-based *Writing To Read* program. "I like it best because this is where I can write."

This sentiment is common enough in my classroom that it has made me wonder why articles written about this program rarely mention the Writing Station, where children use pencils and pens to put down their ideas. Dr. John H. Martin, developer of *Writing to Read*, says that the theory behind his program is that "children learn best to read by being taught to write" (1). It is obvious to me that this central theory of the program is most directly translated into practice at the relatively non-technological Writing Station. Yet, the IBM program costs about \$15,000 for the computers, its software, tape recorders, and typewriters. Could it be that the attraction of a new technological apparatus, rather than solid teaching theory, is most responsible for selling the *Writing to Read* program? Other, more practical questions also arise when a district considers adopting the program, as ours did:

1. Can the goals of the program be accomplished without the expense of the equipment?
2. Can they be accomplished without the rigid routine?
3. Can they be accomplished by teachers in their own classrooms rather than in a special center?

LANGUAGE ARTS JOURNAL OF MICHIGAN

Answering these questions begins with an understanding of the basic features of the program.

The *Writing to Read* program was developed by Dr. John Henry Martin, a retired educator. It claims to be a computer-based instructional system for developing writing and reading skills of kindergarten and first-grade students. The system works within a planned *Writing to Read* Center, a separate room that includes several learning stations:

The Computer Station—where a few children in the class are seated in pairs in front of IBM PC Jr.'s equipped with voice output. Over the two half-years that they are in the program, students are taught 42 phonemes and how they can be combined to produce 30 key words.

The Work Journal Station—where audio cassette tapes instruct students in filling out "work journals," then drill them on the new phonemes they learned on the computer. Each child has ten work journals to complete in the two years.

The Writing/Typing Station—where the students write their own stories phonetically and read them to the teacher. They also can type these stories on typewriters.

The Listening Library Station—where students listen through earphones and follow along to recorded readings of children's books.

The Make Words Station—where the students have the choice of several types of activities, such as a felt

board, magnetic board, or letter cards to make the words learned on the computer; they also can recombine the letters to make new words.

Children have partners during the time they are in the Center. The children are supposed to stay at any one station for about fifteen minutes, but it is also recommended that every child go to the Computer, Work Journal, and Writing/Typing station each day. In large classes this does not prove possible, so students in our school are at these three stations about three times a week. The boys and girls each have a folder in which they keep their writings and the work journal they are currently working on. A laminated schedule, a weekly list that shows the children which stations they will be working at each day, is taped on the back of each folder.

After initial interest in the *Writing to Read* program broadened into visits to IBM in Grand Rapids and a school where the program was in operation, our school decided to implement it. The summer before we began using the program, one of our kindergarten teachers was sent by the school district to Atlanta, Georgia, where she received training as a staff support person. IBM also sent a representative to our school in both the fall and spring to give an inservice to the teaching staff, with special attention given to the kindergarten and first grade teachers directly involved in the program.

In our school, the kindergarten students actually began *Writing to Read* during the second semester of the school year, and the first grade students continued with the program in the first semester of the following

year. The kindergarten classes went to the center four days a week for an hour, fifteen minutes at each of four stations. Due to time limitations, the first grade elected to go five days a week for 45 minutes, with fifteen minutes spent at each of three stations. The program strongly recommends having an aide in the center along with the teacher. Generally, our aide handles the computers and shows the children where to start working in their work journals. If she sees anyone needing assistance, however, she helps. The aide also has the center ready for the next class to begin at their scheduled time.

Despite this tight scheduling, we have seen many positive outcomes from the *Writing to Read* program, even in its first year. First, when teachers tested new first-graders in the fall, they found that most children who had used the IBM program in kindergarten knew all their consonant sounds. Second, a greater than usual percentage of children knew short vowel sounds, even though these concepts are usually very challenging for this age level. Third, many children were ready to listen to and identify the ending consonant sound in a word. Fourth, the children had an enthusiasm for listening to stories being read to them. Fifth, some children would try to write sentences without asking for help with spelling, although others were still in earlier stages of writing, using only beginning consonants to represent a word or idea. Sixth, the computer relieved the teacher of supervising the basic drill work involved in the sounding out of the words by emphasizing the sound of each letter of the 30 words taught in the program. Seventh, the program itself, by using computers, typewriters, and tape recorders, caused public curiosity about the program and brought publicity to our school. Eighth, parents seemed to like the program

because the writing their children brought home was tangible evidence of what they were learning. Finally, having an aide in the center benefited both the teacher and the children; our aide is invaluable because of the assistance she provides, a service not available in our regular classrooms. Generally, the boys and girls who go to the Center like it there and seem to be learning from the program.

On the other hand, we have found that the *Writing to Read* program has disadvantages as well. Some are caused by the crowded conditions in the building itself. We do not have an extra room for the *Writing to Read* Center, so a room has been "made" using portable walls in our open library area. This creates a small room with open doors in which noise from the center disturbs the library area and any noise in the library, or traffic walking through the area, bothers the students in the center. About one-fourth of the library area has been taken away to set up this room, crowding the library. In fact, the library aide can no longer read to the students on their weekly library visits.

The *Writing to Read* Center is itself a small area, about 512 square feet, making it very difficult to move around in. When I want to listen to children read their stories, I quite often have to ask them to move their chairs so I can get through to them. It is also hard for our small area to accommodate the many visitors we have from other schools who wish to view the program.

Not all schools will encounter this kind of space problem if they have unused classrooms, but they **will** be faced with time constraints. Our first-

grade teachers want to run the program in the morning. This arrangement crowds our already busy morning schedule, so we have shifted some of our morning events, such as Calendar and Weather, to the afternoon. Now the afternoon schedule is crowded.

Not only does the general scheduling of the Center pose problems, but so too does the scheduling of the children during their time in the Center. IBM has established guidelines for the proper scheduling of students, which includes a recommended order for the stations at which the students work and how often they are to work there. For example, the Work Journal Station is supposed to be followed by the Computer Station, which in turn is to be followed by the Writing/Typing Station. Therefore, correctly scheduling up to 30 students according to the criteria established by IBM is a very perplexing puzzle. During the first month of using the program, our kindergarten teachers spent nearly 4 hours each week attempting to schedule the students. Some of them finally went to an outside computer consultant in order to have a time-saving computer program designed to solve the scheduling problems.

Another problem is pairing each student with a partner. One partner may pass a test while the other may not, requiring one student to wait while the other partner reviews the words and retakes the test. One partner may be absent for a length of time, causing the other to get far ahead. Partners simply may not be able to work together, requiring that they be reassigned; but solving one problem through reassigning students often creates new difficulties because other pairs will be disrupted.

Not only are the students scheduled tightly within the program, but also each child may not get enough individualized learning opportunities. Though it is true that each child is allowed to proceed at his or her own rate in the *Writing to Read* program, this is individualized pacing, not individualized instruction. Learning styles and attention spans, considered important to success in academic learning, are hard to provide for when all children are given the same program (14).

Another source of difficulty is the rigid schedule that the children follow while in the Center. They spend fifteen minutes at each station and then they must move on. Donald Graves refers to this "getting it down, moving along" routine as the "cha-cha-cha" curriculum (23). The children and teachers in our Center soon begin to feel the pressure of time and are often rushed and frustrated by the program's scheduling strictures.

During our first year in the Center, I have observed other problems with just about every part of the *Writing to Read* program. At the Computer Station, for example, where the program on the computer sounds out the letters and asks the children to find the correct letters on the keyboard, things tend to go too slowly. The children wait impatiently to respond to commands. They follow along for awhile, but when one partner has his or her turn, the other partner quite often does not pay attention. I understand that a faster-paced program is now available from IBM. This may help the situation.

There are problems at the Work Journal Station as well. The tape recorded instructions at this station are fully explained for the first few

work journals, but after that only a small amount is explained and then the tape goes blank for no apparent reason. This is confusing for children. Also, the boys and girls practice writing the letters and sounds of the words that are presented to them at the computer, an exercise that is nearly identical to a dull basal workbook assignment. And mastering the spelling of isolated words learned on the computer before the children advance to the next cycle seems to be an unnecessary requirement. Finally, the "make words" page of the work journal proves very difficult for the immature child and usually necessitates one-on-one help.

At both the Computer and Work Journal Station, some pairs of children work at a faster pace than others. As these children start to get near the end of their ten work journals, the teachers using the program can see another problem surfacing: What can be done with these children at the Computer and the Work Journal Stations after they finish their work at the computer and their ten work journals? To solve this problem, our school purchased "Bouncy Bee Learns Words," another IBM computer software package. We also use audio tapes and skill sheets at the Work Journal Station, which are available in our school.

All is not perfect at the Writing/Typing Station either. Although it is gratifying that the Writing Station offers teachers the opportunity to work with a small group of children at a time, six at the most, the mere fifteen minutes allowed for this interaction is often far too little. As Calkins says, "If students are going to become deeply invested in their writing, and if they are going to draft and revise, sharing their texts with each other as they write, they need the luxury of time" (23). The tight scheduling of the *Writing*

to Read program does not allow that luxury. It is true that a few boys and girls do a good job of typing their stories at this station. Some children get bored at the typewriters, however, and do not care about going there, while others do not get past the exploration stage and only play with the typewriters.

Things are better at the Listening Library Station, though even there some important limitations exist. The children usually sit quietly and look at the books as they listen to the stories on the earphones. Even though they may not be following the words as much as the pictures, the enjoyment of literature is an important part of the station. Unfortunately, there is no opportunity for the teacher to discuss the stories with the children.

There is nothing quiet about the Make Words Station, on the other hand. This is the area that becomes the loudest because the children are doing the activities in groups of two or more. In a small area, such noise can become distracting. The resources here are also somewhat limited: two activities are supplied by IBM, but others must be provided by the teachers or the school.

Another concern has been raised by our second grade teachers. They are wondering what type of writing activities these children should have next year. This concern remains unanswered.

The program description supplied by IBM makes *Writing to Read* sound so very organized and simple, but it does not explain that the program is organized during the extra hours that teachers put into it weekly. First they must record on a weekly progress chart the appropriate writing stage for every student as well as list the work journal in which each child is currently working. The teachers must also write the children's daily schedules each week on the folder charts. All this work is just for the time spent in the *Writing to Read* Center, a small portion of a day's activities.

A more theoretical problem can also be raised about the *Writing to Read* program, since it asks children to start writing at an earlier age than is customary. Writing in kindergarten? Are we asking our young school children to do so much more than their older peers had to do at this age? Probably not. As Verlma West says, "In many cases kindergarten is no longer the child's first experience with school" (32). Many have attended Head Start, formal nursery schools, day care centers, Young Fives programs, or developmental kindergartens. We no longer believe that children come to school knowing nothing about written language. Children learn about written language long before they enter school from products and advertisements on television, cereal boxes, toothpaste tubes, road signs, and restaurant logos. Instead of getting children "ready to read," we now need to use techniques that continue to stimulate the processes of reading and writing that have already begun before children come to school. Therefore, participation in writing is important for these young children. The *Writing to Read* program requires such participation.

It should also be pointed out that the theory behind the *Writing to Read* program has been established for quite some time. Susan Partridge quotes a New York Times News Service article as saying, "With or without the computer, the *Writing to Read* system relies initially on children's phonetic spelling" (5). Phonetic spelling, or "invented spelling" is not a new idea. In 1971, Carol Chomsky suggested that children should begin to write as soon as they knew the letters of the alphabet, and that they should learn to read through the process of learning to write (Spellman and Lutz 265). When young students are encouraged—whether by a teacher or a computer—to use invented or phonetic spelling, the avenue is opened up for children of this age to begin to write and read successfully.

But no matter how sound in theory, it still remains to be seen whether computer-based programs such as *Writing to Read* are compellingly useful in helping children learn to write. Despite all the logistical problems I mentioned earlier, my biggest concern about this tightly-scheduled approach is that it may go too far in de-emphasizing the role of the teacher. IBM's promotional material consistently states our role in terms like this: "The teacher is the educational manager, monitoring students' needs." It may just be an unfortunate choice of words, but I believe that the teacher has more than a managerial role in any reading or writing program. All worthwhile writing and reading takes place when the teacher gives encouragement, help, and suggestions. The computer or typewriters cannot hear the stories being read back by the child. Machines cannot see the students writing their stories and guide them to use the phonemes with their writing. It is impossible for the computer to ask the students questions about their stories, or to encourage them to write more.

LANGUAGE ARTS JOURNAL OF MICHIGAN

Neither can it hug the child if he or she writes about something sad or exciting. Machines will not say they are sorry if a pet dog got hit by a car or a grandma is in the hospital. The teacher is much more than a "manager" or a "monitor." The teacher is the one who makes the writing happen by giving the child help and confidence. And it is the writing, not the technology, that is the backbone of the *Writing to Read* program.

In *Writing to Read*, Dr. John Henry Martin has developed an extension of the philosophy that "children can write what they say and read what they write." But as James M. Wallace asks, "Given the expense of *Writing to Read* in personal time, hardware, and materials, could equal or better results be obtained through other means?" The answer to this question is probably not a simple "yes" or "no." Perhaps a child Wallace quotes answers it best:

I like the tipe riter Best of all
and I like to work with you.
And I like lisoning to the story's
But best I like working with you.
[24]

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