Writing Rock Stars: An After-School Community Partnership in Childhood Literacy

Lisa M. Gring-Pemble
George Mason University

Pamela Garner
George Mason University

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This study explains the development, implementation, and preliminary findings of an after-school pilot writing program that drew upon a peer collaborative model and a community literacy perspective. Preliminary findings suggest important benefits of this partnership for young children, parents, and the surrounding community.

We now know that young children have the capacity to learn more advanced writing techniques and concepts than what they are currently being taught in formal schooling. Many studies show that younger students possess the cognitive and linguistic ability to understand complex syntax, write stories, and present their ideas argumentatively in text and drawings (Chapman, 1994; Jones, 2003; Riley & Reedy, 2005). Those adopting a Vygotskian perspective maintain that these skills are further enhanced by participation in collaborative writing with same-age peers (Jones, 2003). The similarity of status associated with peer collaboration, even in very young children, allows for the co-facilitation of each child's learning (Rogoff, 1998). Similarly, children's participation in child-governed activities, such as playing, drawing, talking, and sharing stories with peers, helps them experience writing as a collaborative activity with relevance to their own lives (Comber & Nixon, 2004; Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

In this essay, we offer observations of an innovative pilot writing program that drew upon a peer collaborative model and a community literacy perspective. Developed as an after school program, this project was an opportunity to foster a community-university partnership (Comstock, 2006) as well as to encourage curricular flexibility and the communal activities that are so critical to literacy development (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Higgins, Long, & Flower, 2006). Specifically, in Fall 2007, the first author developed an after school program—Writing Rock Stars—that was targeted to first, second, and third grade students and housed in a local public elementary school.

The aim of the program, which relied on basic (e.g., grammar) and high-level (e.g., writing planning) skill instruction, was to provide

an enjoyable forum for teaching and learning writing techniques and principles that went beyond state curricular guidelines. For example, writing instruction (e.g., subject-verb agreement, adjectives and adverbs, descriptive paragraph development) is not a required component of the curriculum until the third grade, as set by the English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools. According to the National Commission on Writing (2003), the state of Virginia's writing instruction guidelines, like many other state guidelines, are lacking. In a discussion of how neglected writing has become in all grade levels, the report indicates that significant classroom time has not been devoted to the teaching and practice of writing in school. Children spend fewer than three hours per week on writing skills. The result, then, is that most school-age children cannot write effectively (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Despite calls to improve writing instruction in all grade levels, more recent efforts to reform early childhood education (e.g., No Child Left Behind) have not adequately enhanced writing instruction (Graham & Harris 2005; Olinghouse, 2008).

What are the community-based consequences of a basic writing instruction program that does not introduce grammar, writing planning, and prose instruction until the middle of elementary school? Dropping out of high school is directly associated with earlier difficulties in reading and writing (Mellinee, 2008; Moje, 2000; National Institute for Literacy, 2007). The inability to write well also greatly limits later and long-term opportunities for education and future employment (Black, 2004). Students who are unable to convey their knowledge in the written form that teachers use to assess knowledge may find that their talent is overlooked, and therefore, their sense of what they can accomplish may be limited. As a result, neighborhoods and communities suffer the loss of fully developed social and human capital. The project described below is an important step toward revising basic writing instruction in early elementary school grade levels with the potential of contributing to the personal growth of the children and the communities in which they live.

Background and Description of the Program

In summer 2007, the first author, a University professor and parent of an elementary school-aged child, inquired with the local elementary school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) about after-school offerings for children. Upon learning that the first author had experience teaching composition to first-year college students, the PTA representative invited her to develop an after-school writing program. Initially, the PTA and school administrators suggested that, given standards of learning, a writing-intensive course was appropriate for older elementary school children. Because the first author expressed a desire to teacher younger children, school administrators

allowed her to develop and implement the Writing Rock Stars program for children, first through third grade.

Participant Demographics

Six students – three boys from first-grade, one girl from second grade, and two students (a boy and girl) from third-grade – registered to participate in this first version of the Writing Rock Stars program. Three of the students were white, non-Hispanic; one student was Indian, and two were Pakistani. From a percentage perspective, 50% of the participants in this after-school program were white and 67% were male. This is in comparison to the school's enrollment of 69.8% white students, 45.7% of whom are male (Report of Student Membership, 2007). The three non-white students in the program each spoke and wrote in at least one language other than English. The academic, social, and behavioral skills of the student participants varied dramatically.

Course Development and Implementation

The program consisted of eight one-hour sessions, offered from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. on Thursday afternoons in a classroom. The classroom was familiar to half of the children since it was designated for students who participated in the elementary school's gifted and talented program. The session concluded with an instructor-added ninth session for a "meet the author" celebration of student learning.

In preparing for the after school program, the first author became certified as a substitute public teacher. She also consulted with two first-grade teachers, a school librarian, and other area elementary school teachers of upper-division grades four through six to get ideas about creating a challenging writing-based curriculum for young elementary school children. Several texts, all available from the school and local public libraries, figured prominently in the design of the course, including:

- *Four Square Writing Method for Grades 1-3*
- *Grammar AdLibs*
- *25 Mini-Lessons for Teaching Writing: Quick Lessons that Help Students Become Effective Writers, Grades 3-6*
- *350 Fabulous Writing Prompts*
- *Words Are CATegorical*
- *A Mink, a Fink, a Skating Rink: What is a Noun?*

All but one of the above texts are targeted to upper elementary classrooms, an early indication of the relative lack of texts about advanced writing instruction for younger elementary school children.

Each week, the students learned one part of speech (e.g., noun, adjective, verb, adverb) and engaged in a variety of activities to reinforce

their understanding of the nature and function of different parts of speech. For example, students completed short writing assignments, read entertaining books aloud to identify parts of speech, and listened to music or watched a short selection from the popular video series *Schoolhouse Rock!—Grammar Rock*.

One week, students learned about adjectives. During the lesson, each child received a laminated maple leaf that appeared virtually identical to all the other leaves. After discussing what adjectives were as a class, students had the task of describing their maple leaf as specifically as they could both orally and on paper. Then all the leaves were placed on one desk, and each student described their leaf with adjectives so that others in the class could locate the leaf. Together, the class discussed the importance of descriptive words, especially in cases where precision matters. Building on that lesson, students listened to classical music excerpts from *Peter and the Wolf* and *Carnival of the Animals*. They then used nouns (the part of speech they learned the previous week) as well as adjectives (the newly introduced part of speech) to talk about the music. Next, with the instructor present, the students watched a segment of the *Schoolhouse Rock!* video series on adjectives. Finally, they completed several *Grammar AdLibs* worksheets on adjectives. Like the *MadLibs* upon which these worksheets are based, *Grammar AdLibs* ask students to think of various parts of speech and place the appropriate part of speech in a designated blank space within a short story to create a silly narrative. These worksheets elicited lots of laughter as the children vied to compose the most ridiculous story using various parts of speech.

Students also took home a description of what happened in class, writing activity worksheets, and ideas for how to continue learning at home. At-home suggested activities included identifying nouns, adjectives, and adverbs in daily conversations (e.g., how do particular foods you eat at home taste?), puzzles such as "think of a sentence without a verb" (it can't be done!), and reviewing writing methods we had discussed in the after-school program.

In addition to learning about parts of speech, the students also learned about the roles of different parts of speech in stories. So, for example, the instructor of the after-school program brought in short books such as Dr. Seuss books. As a class, we talked about why we liked or disliked the stories, while identifying different parts of speech in them. The students were also taught how to write stories beginning with idea generation, paragraph creation, and writing revision with many collaborative activities. For example, students were paired in groups of differing writing abilities and asked to brainstorm topics they'd like to develop into short stories. Topics they identified were organized around three central themes including money, animals, and fantasy (e.g., knights and mythical creatures).

Results and Discussion

The instructor evaluated student success with formal written projects: three collaborative book projects and an individual student book project. Initially, students wrote books collaboratively. This gave each student the opportunity to practice writing stories around specific writing prompts designated by the instructor. Consistent with current research studies, the goal of this collaborative writing was to initiate children into the importance of writing, revising, analyzing, and taking responsibility for their work (Anderson, 2008). Every student contributed at least one page to each of the three collaborative books. One book, entitled *Sometimes I Get Scared,* chronicled the many reasons why children get scared and offered practical advice for how to overcome these fears. For example, one first-grader wrote "I get scared of commercials at night. When I get scared of commercials, I close my eyes." (see figure 1 and figure 2) Another first-grader wrote "Sometimes I get scared of robbers. You can get a parent if you get scared." (see figure 3) A third-grader wrote "Sometimes I get scared of the dark. When I do, I go get my mom and dad. I also use a flashlight." (see figure 4) A second collaborative project was a book entitled *If I were the Principal.* A third-grader wrote: "If I was principal… , I wouldn't make people work very hard." (see figure 5) A third book was entitled *If I could interview anyone I would interview…* Sports heroes, favorite teachers, and animals were among the most popular subjects the students wanted to interview. (see figure 6) Each book contained a page with designated space for both sentences and drawings.

Writing the books collaboratively served several functions. Students who were more comfortable writing spent more time expressing their ideas in words and often used more than one page to convey their thoughts. Students who had difficulty writing could still express their main ideas through drawing. In addition, each of these books allowed the instructor to gain insight into the writing abilities and interests of the students. For example, one of the first-grade boys and the third-grade boy both shared strong interests in sports, especially football and baseball. Pairing these students together around a writing assignment worked well because each boy pushed the other to justify his admiration of a particular player or team when writing a paragraph about why that player or team was the best. The match as a whole was equal since even though the first-grader had a much better command of team players and sports rules, the third-grader was a stronger writer.

Writing books as a class also emphasized the fun and creativity associated with writing and revision. For example, as the students worked together during the *Grammar AdLib* exercises and watched the *Schoolhouse Rock!—Grammar Rock* videos, they began to laugh and joke amongst themselves. This joyful atmosphere carried over into the story invention
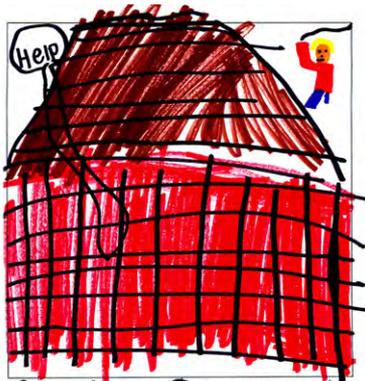
I get scoped of commercials at night

When I get scared of commercials I close my eyes
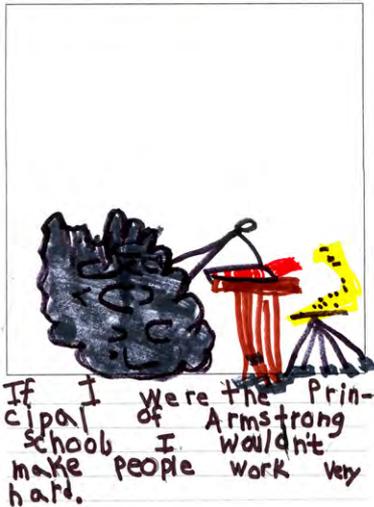
Figures 1 and 2

Help

Sometimes I get scared of robbers. You can get a Parent if you get scared.

Sometimes I get scared of the dark. When I do, I go get my mom and dad. I also use a flashlight.

Figures 3 and 4

process. One student, for instance, crafted a story about a fictional animal he created called a "cowmonkey" (a combination of a cow and monkey) who made banana-flavored milk among other wondrous abilities. Students would compete for the funniest *Grammar AdLib* exercise and comments such as "No, wait! This one rules!" or "No man, how about…" permeated the classroom as the students tried out their creations.

If I were the Prin-
cipal of Armstrong
school I wouldn't
make people work very
hard.

If I could interview anyone
I would interview David
Ortez Manny Ramer-is and
Curts'hiling because they
are good baseball players.

Figures 5 and 6

Once we had completed the collaborative book projects, students had the opportunity to create their own books. Doing so allowed students to experience more advanced writing processes. For example, they had the opportunity to choose their own topic, develop a story with complete paragraphs, and revise their ideas and format. Such opportunities are consistent with research that shows the importance of independent writing as a way for children to test out their knowledge of written language and gain insight into the nuances of meaning and form associated with different sounds, words, and phrases (Stockinger & Tharpe, 2006). Furthermore, studies also indicate that developing childhood authorial agency will likely foster student engagement in the writing process (Dyson, 2008b). In addition, the individual writing process gave rise to questions about the differences between fiction and non-fiction, doing research to support ideas, and how to draw pictures that represented the ideas on the page. For example, one student wanted to write about wolves and lions, his two favorite animals. When the instructor asked the student where he might get more information about the animals, the student replied that library books and encyclopedias might be good resources. Other students shared experiences (e.g., school trips to museums and family visits to zoos and historic sites) as possible sources of information. We spent the next few minutes in class talking about doing research, just like the main character Jack does in the popular children's book series *Magic Tree House*. Although the class did not require research or teach students how to do research, the discussions did open up possibilities for students to think about its importance. In other words, the simple discussion introduced the students

to a concept that some of them might be able to pursue outside of the classroom given interest and time.

Once the students had the opportunity to revise their individual stories and illustrate them, they added other components typical of a published book including a dedication page, a copyright page, and an "about the author" page, again opening up opportunities to discuss and appreciate different aspects of the book publication process. Then the instructor submitted the student work off to the educationally-based Creations by You, which binds original works into published books. Following the completion of the last official class, the instructor held a "Meet the Author" celebration and invited parents, guardians, school teachers, and administrators, as well as other family members of each student to attend.

At the celebration, the instructor welcomed all the guests to visit a display table of the activities, resource books, and other materials influential in the after school program. Next, the instructor introduced the children and each student read her or his book to the audience. This simple activity reinforced the connection between oral and written literacy, signaled to students the importance of their creations, and fostered a sense of community responsibility for literacy by encouraging parents and guardians to continue the process of writing at home.

Qualitative data indicate this after-school program had some success for individual students, parents, and the larger community.

Students Successes

First, students developed much stronger writing skills, especially in the area of writing revision. For example, after writing the books together as a class, the instructor introduced the four-square method, a flexible way to move students from topic development to paragraph writing. After each session, the instructor typed individual student work and inserted questions to encourage the students to elaborate more fully on their ideas. After the instructor commented on initial story drafts, students expanded their ideas in response to the instructor's feedback. For instance, one student wanted to write about castles. This student initially wrote: "Castles have kings. Kings are cool." The instructor typed next to this statement: "What makes kings so cool? Are they cool because of what they say? What they eat? What they wear? Why do you think kings are cool?" After discussing his book with another student in class, the first-grader revised his initial statement to read "Castles have kings. Kings are cool **because kings rule over the land, they have power, and they wear cool clothes and crowns.**" Collaborating with another student in the revision process enabled this student, whose experience was typical of all students in the class, to identify a topic sentence and add support for his claim.

A sample of this same first-grader's writing later in the year provides additional evidence of writing growth. Moving beyond a non-fiction story of castles, the first-grader wrote a creative story about reindeer entitled "The Day I Found Two Reindeer in My Lunchbox," in response to a prompt given to him by his teacher. The story appearing below demonstrates a coherent storyline, some more advanced paragraph development, and the use of more sophisticated punctuation and dialogue.

"The Day I Found Two Reindeer in My Lunchbox"

Our class went to the cafeteria. I opened my lunchbox and out jumped two reindeer. They ran to the computer lab and jumped on all of the computers. And then they jumped out the window. They ran to the playground and saw a car. They got in it and the keys were in it so they turned it on.

I tried to catch up but they were too fast. They smashed through the school. I said "Oh no I might have to go to the principal's office today. My parents won't be very happy."

But actually the principal came running out of the school saying "great job boy! Your reindeer made a hole in the school." I said "Shouldn't I be in the principal's office?" "No," said the principal. "I wanted a hole right there." "So I am not in trouble?" "Yes, you are not in trouble."

The reindeer looked up on the air. They saw Santa Claus. Santa Claus said not to open your lunch box when it is shaking because two reindeer will pop out. The End.

Of course, this after-school program alone cannot account for this child's writing success; however, it likely contributed to his level of confidence, ability to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction stories, and his mastery over principles of language use.

Preliminary data also show that this after-school program may engage children with behavioral problems. For example, one child with a reputation for behavioral disruptions in her own class experienced a transformation in this after-school program. Initially, the student accused the instructor of "not teaching a real class" and tried to dissuade other students from writing. Several teachers in the school advised that if the student's behavior continued, the instructor should remove her from the program. Instead, the instructor acknowledged this student's creative and artistic talent in front of the other children and encouraged her to share her talents in class. After a few weeks, this student exhibited significant positive behavioral changes as she became an enthusiastic participant. Although she presented some occasional behavioral challenges, she also thrived in this writing program

since it was inclusive of both an artistic and written component, providing each student more opportunities to demonstrate their talents.

These individual successes are important not only to individual growth but also to the surrounding community. As evidenced by research cited in the beginning of this article, early childhood literacy correlates to retention in school and long-term educational and employment opportunities. Programs that have success in encouraging a child's ability in and passion for literacy, channeling disruptive behavior in positive ways, and encouraging teamwork among students, ultimately benefit the larger community.

Impact on Parents

This pilot writing program also fostered opportunities for parent-child interactions around literacy. Every week students would share with the instructor ways they had practiced parts of speech at home during the week. For example, a third-grade student talked about how much fun he had tricking his mother and asking her to come up with a sentence that did not have a verb in it. Both he and his mother reported engaging in weekly challenges based on the after-school program's homework and suggestions for fun at home.

One first-grader came into the program frustrated with reading, writing, and his inability to write full sentences. By the end of the program, this same student came to find joy in written and oral communication. His mother reported to the instructor that the *Grammar AdLibs* and other take home exercises were "hits" and that her son acquired a marked interest in learning to read and write. By early spring, as part of an assignment in his first-grade class, the student crafted his own several-sentence response to the prompt of "I followed a Leprechaun to the End of a Rainbow and …" His response read: "I followed a leprechaun to the end of a rainbow and took his entire pot of gold. And he got ultra mad, and he was so disappointed he didn't run after me. He exploded." This first-grader's accomplishments cannot be traced directly to this pilot program; however, the program did give him a more positive outlook on writing. According to his mother, the child's experiences in a supportive extra-curricular activity with his peers, in combination with homework, resulted in progress.

The mother of a third-grade participant also had positive comments. She observed that her daughter would work at home on the outside class activities assigned in the after- school program and the development of her individual story. The mother further commented how proud her daughter was about her individual story, as was evidenced by the fact that the daughter kept her work a secret so she could surprise her mother with the final book as a present on the "Meet the Author" celebration day.

Importantly, at least one parent (and in many cases both parents) of the student participants took time to attend this voluntary celebration. In fact, the response to the instructor's invitation was overwhelming. Parents volunteered to bring treats and drinks, and many families brought cameras and video cameras to record the special day. One second-grade student told the instructor that her parents had demanding work schedules and "were never able to come to school events." This student usually went straight from the Writing Rock Stars program to the student after-care program where she would be picked up later. The second-grader's parents told the instructor that their daughter was excited about her writing and that they were eager to come see her read her book. Programs such as this that increase parent-child interactions and provide space for dialogue outside the classroom among children, parents, teachers, and school administrators can increase awareness about the importance of literacy and cement familial and community ties.

Community Impact

A final indicator of this pilot writing program's success is the response from school administrators and teachers. The president of the PTA requested that the instructor teach a similar course the following spring (and perhaps on a regular basis) because of the positive parent and student comments. In addition, one of the first grade teachers who had two students enrolled in the program invited the Writing Rock Stars instructor to her class to do a writing activity around the presidential elections. The first-grade class was going to write a collaborative book on what they would each do if elected president.

Although the program has yet to be fully repeated, a second-grade teacher in another Fairfax County School requested some of the *Grammar AdLib* and "Four-Square Method" resources from the first author after learning about the writing program. This teacher recently began using these resources in her classroom. We have yet to hear from her about her formal experiences, but plan to further explore ways to determine the *friendliness* of the program and associated resources. We also wonder how this program and others like it would fare under the direction of professionals with more experience teaching writing to young students. These are issues that should be explored in future research. While preliminary and anecdotal in nature, this evidence all does allude to the potential rewards of such early elementary writing programs to increasing collaboration among community stakeholders in early childhood education.

Implications

Overall, this pilot writing program has implications for both individual students and the community in which these children live. First, the program highlights the fact that young children benefit considerably from participation in an in-depth writing program (Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008; Ritchey, 2008). Among the benefits are increased interest and enjoyment in writing, along with teacher awareness that young children can acquire knowledge of advanced writing concepts if they are presented in a fun and enjoyable way (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2004; Zecker, 1996).

Perhaps the balance of basic and high-level instruction worked well in the Writing Rock Stars environment because each child had different strengths as writers and different learning styles. Also, the peer collaboration promoted equality of status in the classroom regardless of grade level. Children who understood concepts well demonstrated their knowledge by teaching their peers. Students who struggled benefited by having their peers explain concepts in student-centered ways. This pilot writing program, then, supports research that children can achieve much more when they are engaged in collaborative learning activities, and also that early elementary school children acquire important literacy skills in the context of supportive peer relationships (Jones, 2003). Specifically, this program evinces that, if offered structured support with opportunities to create and revise, young children can work collaboratively to teach each other how to manipulate parts of speech, plan and organize story writing, and illustrate their writing with appropriate drawings.

Students in the after-school program displayed a variety of learning styles; some children displayed a propensity for auditory learning while others needed hands-on practice. Such differences highlight the importance of addressing different learning styles, recognizing multiple forms of literacy (e.g., writing stories, drawing pictures), and providing ample and varied opportunities for learning, discussion, and review (Kouri & Telander, 2008; Siegel, Kontovourki, Schmier & Enriquez 2008). Findings of the Writing Rock Stars study are consistent with education research affirming the ability of early elementary students to understand parts of speech, comprehend linguistic structures, write in a variety of genres, and exercise their multiple literacies (Chapman, 1994; Juel, 1988; Siegel, Kontovourki, Schmier, & Enriquez, 2008).

This pilot program also suggests several community-related possibilities. For example, one insight is that success in story-writing in young children may be dependent upon student ownership of ideas and opportunities for revision (Dyson 2008b; Stockinger & Tharpe, 2006). In the Writing Rocks Stars experience, students had the choice to generate their own story idea and evidence. Giving children some prompts and

ideas to write about helped initiate conversations and spark ideas. A writing program such as this which focused on topics of concern to the students and community (e.g., bullying, divorce, presidential elections, and national tragedies such as 9/11) offers promising ways to involve all community members in the identification of and solutions to community challenges.

Another implication of this program is that it demonstrates the importance of involving the community in enhancing student learning. When parents picked up their children after school, they would often comment about how much their kids enjoyed doing the take-home activities or singing the songs we had learned in class. During regular class time, teachers of the writing program participants invited the after-school program participants to read their created books to their peers. Dialogues between the program's instructor and other elementary school teachers resulted in the sharing of best practices and materials.

Community support is especially important with programs such as this one that involve more complex levels of instruction than what are currently required by standards of learning. As Dyson (2008a) asserts, if children do not receive linguistic instruction attentive to linguistic and social conventions both inside and outside of the classroom, they will create their own constructs. Drawing upon her results, this work suggests that educators re-imagine and revise the components of written instruction in early education to accommodate linguistic conventions students are likely to use in their daily lives. This attention to early childhood writing intervention may be especially important for children who find writing difficult, enabling teachers to identify and address writing challenges early (Graham & Harris, 2005; Ritchey, 2008).

We are, of course, mindful of the limited resources that many schools experience. But as this experience suggests, finding ways to collaborate with parents and teachers as well as capitalize on community resources (e.g., after school programs, PTA, businesses) may yield innovative and cost-effective solutions.

Limitations

Although this work suggests that early writing instruction can be effective in promoting the writing development of young children, it has several limitations. First, only six students participated in the project and therefore the project's scope was limited. Second, this was a qualitative study. Writing scores for the children were not available before the program was implemented or after it was completed. A third and related issue is that this program was voluntary and cost sixty-eight dollars per child. Consequently, the willingness of parents to pay for the program indicates parental support of writing as an important developmental concept. That said, the program fee – which covered the cost of the instructor's salary – course materials,

and PTA profit, could be reduced substantially without sacrificing program quality. Fourth, this after school program (like all after-school programs in this particular school) was administered by an active PTA. Part of the program's success may be attributable to this outside support. A similar program may not fare as well in a school without active teacher, parent, and community involvement.

Nevertheless, the Writing Rocks Stars program did seem to provide children with both high-level and basic writing skills, a balance that research indicates results in a more effective writing program (Olinghouse, 2008). Moreover, the partnership between the elementary school and university was successful in laying the groundwork for future collaborations. Before making any policy decisions or recommendations, it would be important to use the pilot as the basis for generating a more comprehensive study on a larger scale using experimental design (Maxwell 1996; Siedman, 1991). Overall, the pilot writing program yielded important insights and recommendations suggesting that early writing instruction is a beneficial, potentially cost effective way of enhancing young children's literacy skills and future successes with significant benefits to the community.

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Dr. Lisa M. Gring-Pemble is an associate professor at New Century College, George Mason University. A Phi-Beta Kappa graduate of St. Olaf College (1992), Gring-Pemble received her M.A. (1996) and Ph.D. (2000) in communication from the University of Maryland. Her research focuses on political communication, public policy, public address, and social movements

from a rhetorical-critical perspective. She is the author of *Grim Fairy Tales: The Rhetorical Construction of American Welfare Policy* and a co-edited volume—*Political Communication: An Anthology of Essential Readings*. Her work has appeared in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech, Political Communication, and Communication Quarterly*. In 2005, Gring-Pemble received the George Mason University Teaching Excellence Award.

Pamela Garner is Associate Professor of Integrative and Interdisciplinary Studies in New Century College at George Mason University. She received her doctorate in human development from Texas A&M University and has had academic appointments at several other institutions, including the University of Houston and Virginia Commonwealth University. She was also awarded an NIH Minority Fellowship, which she completed at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston, Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. Dr. Garner has studied the social emotional development of young children for over 20 years and she is a past Associate Editor for the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* and is the author of over 35 articles.