Introduction to special issue on writing

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This special issue is an outgrowth of two symposia on writing at international meetings in 2008. Miller, Molfese, Hooper, Wagner, and Berninger presented at the biennial meeting, Society for Research on Child Development, in Denver, CO in a symposium titled “Writing development from early to middle childhood: New interdisciplinary findings and models”. Research presented at this symposium illustrated the kinds of writing development projects that are funded by federal agencies in the United States (e.g., the National Institutes of Health, US Department of Health and Human Services, and the Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education). Collectively, the symposium papers drew on multiple methods and conceptual models to study the writing acquisition process from a developmental perspective. At the Santa Barbara, CA Conference on Writing Research, *Writing Research across Borders*, in which writing researchers from 43 countries participated, Beers, Nagy, and Berninger presented papers in an Invited Symposium on “Levels of Language in Assessment and Instruction: Lessons from Longitudinal Studies Grades 1 to 7.” Their studies in that symposium and this special issue call attention to the need for more research on how specific levels of

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language such as syntax and discourse structures support translation of cognitive representations and processing into written language.

The organization of the articles in this issue reflects the three goals of the special issue: (a) calling attention to the need for more life span research on writing development, including diverse socioeconomic and language groups; (b) writing research that takes into account the various levels of language involved in writing; and (c) evaluating alternative measurement models for assessing writing acquisition in developing writers. The first article, by Miller and McCardle, calls attention to the growing recognition in the United States of the need for an enhanced focus on the needs of writers across the lifespan and diverse settings, for example, school and workplace, a developmental perspective, and the challenges facing developing writers of all ages. They assert that a successful, comprehensive research effort would require increased collaboration and communication across the broader writing research community, and issue an invitation for more national and international sharing of writing research, especially related to unmet needs of writers across the life span, writers from low SES backgrounds, and writers who speak languages other than the official language of the country in which they reside.

The next three articles are organized by level of language, as it relates to transcription (handwriting and spelling) and text generation at the subword-, sentence-, and text- level. The second article by Molfese, Beswick, Jacobi-Vessels, Armstrong, Culver, White, Ferguson, Rudasill, and Molfese provides empirical evidence that letter formation is related concurrently to both writing and reading in preschoolers and kindergartners; it does not predict subsequent writing development, suggesting that the early childhood years are characterized by developmental plasticity but the current emphasis in preschool programs on name writing rather than broader writing activities may not sufficiently enhance the emergent literacy skills of young children. In the third article by Berninger, Nagy, and Beers, the developmental emergence from grades 1 through 4 of syntactic awareness, as assessed by the ability to write just one sentence, was charted; by grade 4, syntactic awareness was related to combining two sentences into one. In the fourth article by Beers and Nagy, the relationship of syntactic complexity (clauses per T-unit and words per clause) and four genres of text (narrative, descriptive, compare/contrast, and persuasive) was investigated in grades 3, 5, and 7; they found evidence of interactions among syntactic complexity and genre.

The last two articles evaluated models of writing assessment in early and middle childhood by using multivariate statistical methods. Based on confirmatory factor analyses of writers in grades 1 and 4, Wagner, Puranik, Foorman, Foster, Gehron Wilson, Tschinkel, and Thatcher Kantor identified a five-factor model that included the following factors and showed both developmental stability and variability depending on factors: (a) macro-organization of ideas, (b) number and diversity of words used, (c) mean length of T-unit and syntactic density, (d) spelling and punctuation and (e) handwriting fluency. Based on confirmatory and longitudinal structural equation modeling from first through second grade, Hooper, Costa, McBee, Anderson, Yerby, Knuth, and Childress identified three core latent traits and these were found at both grades 1 and 2: (a) Fine-Motor (sequential finger movements), (b) Word-Level Language, and (c) Attention/Executive/Working Memory Functions.

The guest editors and contributors hope that this special issue will stimulate further interdisciplinary research, drawing on developmental, cognitive, and educational psychology, neuropsychology, and linguistics, to study the processes of writing development and evaluate alternative evidence-based assessment models of the writing acquisition process during early to middle childhood. We hope that such research will be conducted in many countries representing different languages and cultures and that much cross-language and cross-culture sharing and comparing of data will result, with the long-term consequence of meeting the educational needs of diverse writers across the life span and across writing settings in schools and at work.