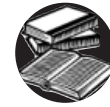




EDUCATORS PUBLISHING SERVICE



## Research-Based Writing

### THE WORDS I USE SERIES

Alana Trisler and Patrice Cardiel

By Anna Cimochoowski, Ph.D.

The *Words I Use* series of personal wordbooks, writing journals, and reading response journals is designed to help students develop and use their vocabularies and learn correct spelling in conjunction with a broad range of reading and writing skills. Recent research has confirmed both the importance of these literacy skills and the effectiveness of the methods that the books use.

Reading and writing are both forms of language processing that require knowledge of correct spelling (Moats, 2000). Learning to read and learning to write also share other vital knowledge and skills, and thereby reinforce one another as students proceed through the elementary grades. Moreover, most state, national, and international literacy assessments now require students to apply both receptive and expressive literacy skills (NCTE/IRA, 1996; NAEP, 2003; PIRLS, 2001).

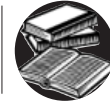
Using the full range of books in the *Words I Use* series takes students from recognizing and writing their first words to creating extended compositions and demonstrating higher-level reading and thinking skills. In addition, the *Words I Use* series helps students make meaningful connections between the receptive literacy skill of reading and the expressive literacy skill of writing. The series also enables students to use metacognitive strategies as they personalize and take responsibility for important aspects of their own learning. In particular, students' ability to select and learn words of their own choosing has been shown to make significant contributions to academic success.

#### Personal Word Books

In the primary grades, *My Word Book* (K) and *Words I Use When I Write* (Grades 1–2) help students learn the alphabetic

The *Words I Use* series begins in kindergarten with *My Word Book* (also in Spanish), and offers *Words I Use When I Write* (also in Spanish), *My Word Works*, and monthly journals for grades 1 and 2. Help-at-Home Guides are available for *My Word Book*, *Words I Use When I Write*, *Palabras que yo uso cuando escribo*, and *Mi Libro de palabras*. Seasonal Journals are for grades 2 and 3. *More Words I Use When I Write* with a Help-at-Home Guide and *Writing about Reading* with a Teacher's Guide are for grades 3 and 4. For grades 4–6 *Word Power!* and *Advanced Journal Writing* continue the series. The series culminates with *Advanced Words I Use When I Write* and *Advanced Writing about Reading* for grades 5 and 6.

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principle and develop phonological and phonemic awareness at the emergent and early stages of reading and writing. It is well documented that when children can recognize and name the letters of the alphabet they have a good foundation for learning the alphabetic principle (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1983), and that this principle is an essential component of learning to read in an alphabetic language (Chall, 1983; Juel, 1988).

By looking for words that are listed alphabetically and adding new words that start with the same letter, primary students' use of their personal wordbooks builds understanding of and familiarity with the alphabet. The young children also begin to associate the alphabetic symbols with particular sounds, and practice reading and writing those symbols as parts of meaningful words, thus reinforcing grapheme/phoneme correspondence.

*My Word Book* and *Words I Use When I Write* also help students learn to recognize words, and it has been amply documented that skill at recognizing words is strongly related to the speed of initial reading acquisition (Bertelson, 1986; Juel, 1991; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989; Stanovich, 1986). And there is evidence that this relationship is causal: the development of word recognition skills leads to increased reading comprehension ability (Chall, 1989; Herman, 1985; Stanovich, 1985). Research continues to show that word recognition is a foundational process of reading (in Barr et. al. 1991).

*My Word Book* and *Words I Use When I Write* provide initial lists of high-frequency sight words (100 and 500, respectively), which students see and write repeatedly as they use their books. *More Words I Use* (grades 3–4) and *Advanced Words I Use* (grades 5–6) provide students with longer lists of higher-level words (1,100 and 1,200, respectively). This progression, along with other modifications in the size and format of the words, reflects the fact that spelling skills, like reading skills, are acquired developmentally in stages (Zutell, 1998; Bear & Templeton, 1998).

**Using the full range of books in the *Words I Use* series takes students from recognizing and writing their first words to creating extended compositions and demonstrating higher-level reading and thinking skills.**



In all these books, students also add new words on the blank lines that the books provide. The children then refer to the initial list of sight words, plus any new words, for spelling support when writing independently. In this way, students learn to identify whole words with fluency and automaticity as they build a sight vocabulary with words common to their speaking and writing vocabularies.

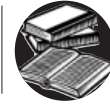
Research has shown that children learn words best by meeting them many times and in different contexts, which leads to a deep processing of meaning (Dole, Sloan, & Trathen, 1995; Rosenbaum, 2001). We also know that single contextual exposures to new words do not necessarily produce learning (Schatz & Baldwin, 1986). Although researchers differ on the number of meaningful exposures to a word before it becomes automatic, they agree that multiple exposures help a child to learn a word (Beck, McKeown, & Omanson, 1987; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986).

Armbruster (2002) also found that repeated exposures to vocabulary in many contexts improve word learning, as does instruction that promotes active engagement with vocabulary. Using the *Words I Use* personal dictionaries on a regular basis clearly provides students with multiple exposures to key words and engages students in actively reading and writing the words in diverse contexts.

The process of continually adding new words and then using those words when writing leads students from word recognition to vocabulary development. To summarize Blachowicz (2000) on best practices in vocabulary instruction:

- Vocabulary learning works best when students are immersed in words.
- Vocabulary learning works best when students actively discover ways in which words are related to one another and to personal experiences.
- Vocabulary learning works best when students have control over word learning.

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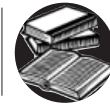
- Vocabulary learning works best when students are aided in developing independent strategies.
- Vocabulary learning works best when students use words in meaningful ways.

The *Words I Use* personal dictionaries are well aligned with these practices in a number of respects. These wordbooks contribute to the immersion of students in words and help students see word relationships. The ability to add new words provides control over word learning and aids the development of independent strategies. The books' role in supporting writing also helps students relate the words to personal experiences, as well as use the words in other meaningful ways.

The *Words I Use* personal dictionaries are particularly well suited to provide control over learning, and numerous studies have demonstrated the value of self-selection of words. The control offered by self-selection was found to be an important factor in building a generalized vocabulary (Rapp-Rudell & Shearer, 2002). Studies of fourth graders, fifth graders, and seventh graders also found that the students were highly successful in learning a majority of the words chosen for study (Fisher, Blachowicz & Smith, 1991; Blachowicz, Fisher, Costa & Pozzi, 1993). In addition, Beyersdorfer (1991) found that collaborative word choice, in which both the student and the teacher contribute words for study, may be needed for content-area learning and difficult, new conceptual topics.

Haggard (1986a, 1986b) advocated self-collection strategy as a versatile vocabulary development procedure to stimulate growth in word knowledge. Among her premises were:

- internal motivation exerted a strong influence on vocabulary acquisition and development
- words that label or define an experience are learned more quickly and easily than those that are not
- the art of collecting words increases sensitivity to new words and enjoyment in word learning



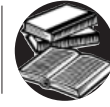
Through their development of vocabulary, the *Words I Use* personal dictionaries also make an important contribution to reading comprehension, as vocabulary knowledge has been found to be a crucial factor in comprehension (LaFlamme, 1997). Earlier research also found that vocabulary knowledge was the most important predictor of reading comprehension (Davis, 1968 and Thorndike, 1973 in Gunning, 2003). Further, slowness in accessing meaning of words from one's "mental dictionary" can hinder comprehension (Samuels, 1994).

With regard to spelling, studies have shown that knowledge of spelling plays an important role in successful reading. According to the research, students need to learn very complete orthographic representations of individual words (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2002). For the skilled reader, spelling and word reading represent nearly synonymous sources of orthographic knowledge (Ehri, 1980, 1991, 1992, 1998).

The *Words I Use* personal dictionaries provide students with continuing opportunities to read and write complete words. The books then support the use of these words as part of the writing process. The repeated reading and writing of a word under different circumstances and especially the ability to refer repeatedly to the correct spelling of the word when writing help students learn and memorize the individual letters that make up the word. This, in turn, facilitates reading the word fluently in a new context, as well as distinguishing the word from similar words.

Of course, spelling is a vital and challenging component of writing. English spelling is complex, even for many adults, because some letters, especially vowels, often have varying sounds that depend on the surrounding letters and their position within words. The Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon origins of words also affect how words are pronounced and spelled. As children move through the grades, progressing from the "learning to read" stage (grades pre-K through 3)

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through the “reading to learn” stage (grades 4 through 6), the vocabulary load increases, spelling becomes more difficult, and the demands of writing increase. Research indicates that problems in spelling often interfere with a student’s proficiency, fluency, and self-confidence as a writer and may distract students from content by focusing their attention on spelling (Bos & Vaughn, 1991).

In order to learn correct spelling under these circumstances, children need ongoing support. The *Words I Use* series provides this support by enabling students to look up the spelling of words frequently, and thereby get into the habit of spelling the words correctly in the midst of writing. According to Zutell (1978), active involvement in the process of learning to spell results in better learning, and Ehri (1989) suggested that the more students practice, the more words they will be able to spell correctly.

The repeated use of the *Words I Use* personal dictionaries offers advantages over traditional spelling instruction, which relies on basals that provide weekly lists of words to be mastered. Bos & Vaughn (1991) found that most spelling programs placed little emphasis on maintenance of previously learned words, and that there was little support for the ongoing transfer of correct spelling in activities beyond the specific spelling lesson.

There is also other research evidence that personal dictionaries are effective tools for learning correct spelling. As Scheuermann and Jacobs noted (1994):

The personal spelling dictionary is tailored to each individual student’s development because it includes words that are selected by the students or by the teacher based on student needs and interests. This helps ensure that, unlike spelling lists created elsewhere, the target words are meaningful to the student. According to Good and Brophy (1986), the degree to which material is meaningful affects the quality of learning.



**Use of the spelling dictionary in all curricular areas, and as a reference during multiple written assignments over time, increases the students' opportunities for practicing correct spelling of problematic words.**

Use of the spelling dictionary in all curricular areas, and as a reference during multiple written assignments over time, increases the students' opportunities for practicing correct spelling of problematic words. These increased opportunities to respond have a positive correlation with increased achievement (Greenwood, Delquadri & Hall, 1984).

Use of a spelling dictionary throughout the day is a form of "distributed practice," which results in higher maintenance of learning than a concentrated single session (Good & Brophy, 1986).

Scheurman and Jacobs also point out that use of a personal dictionary during written assignments may result in improved written content and higher-level vocabulary, because the book provides students with an adaptive approach to managing spelling. This is especially true for students who, because of spelling deficits, tend to use words they know how to spell as opposed to accessing their entire expressive vocabulary. A personal dictionary like *Words I Use When I Write* is also adaptive because it includes pages for personal nouns pertinent to individual students, such as the names of family members and classmates.

Roswell and Chall (1994) recommended that students keep ready for reference an alphabetized notebook in which they record the correct spelling of words they find difficult to remember. The authors also recommended a book that lists frequently misspelled words, stating, "These two resources can help students to avoid the laborious task of trying to find correct spellings in a dictionary...an almost impossible chore for poor spellers who usually do not know the various ways in which given spoken words can be spelled."

Along with the personal dictionaries, the *Words I Use* series also includes *My Word Works* (grades 1–2), a word-book organized according to letter combinations within words. The first section provides a template for collecting words that contain consonant combinations, while the second



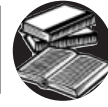
section is for vowel-consonant combinations also known as phonograms or “chunks.” Words organized in this way are also commonly referred to as “word families.” In many primary grade classrooms, word families are collected and displayed on large charts known as word walls. Students can refer to the word wall and collect the words in their copies of *My Word Works*.

Research shows that when good readers encounter a long unfamiliar word, they assign the word a pronunciation by chunking letter patterns into manageable units (Adams, 1990; Mewhort & Campbell, 1981). And a relatively small number of phonograms can be used to generate a large number of words. Wylie and Durrell (1970) point out that nearly 500 primary grade words can be derived from only 37 rhyming phonograms. By looking up and adding words according to the letter combinations within them, children become more aware of pronunciations and spelling patterns, which makes it easier to recognize the words when reading and to spell them correctly when writing.

*More Word Works* (grades 3–4) uses similar formats to organize words according to prefixes, suffixes, and vowel sounds. *The Words I Use* series also includes a personal thesaurus, *Word Power!* which helps students collect synonyms for frequently used words and expand their writing vocabulary. Along with *My Word Works*, these books are supported by the previously cited research on multiple exposures to words in different contexts, self-selection of vocabulary words, and practicing the spelling and usage of words.

All of these books also serve as informal or “authentic” assessments, which document students’ progress in vocabulary development, spelling, handwriting, and other important aspects of literacy. A review of individuals’ word choices can also provide valuable insights into their interests and thought processes.

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### **Words I Use Writing Journals**

To provide additional support for the learning and use of words while writing, as well as the development of other writing skills, the *Words I Use* series includes writing journals that offer students the opportunity to practice correct spelling and use their new vocabulary in a meaningful context. As Gunning (2001) states, writing provides a reason for learning to spell, along with opportunities for students to apply their skills. Cooper (1997) also made the point that one of the best ways to make students aware of words and promote ownership is to encourage them to write.

Writing about high-interest topics in their journals not only provides motivation for students to use the correct spelling and new words they are learning, it also helps students develop the habit of using correct spelling and new words when they are actually engaged in writing. All journals in the series include word banks and/or spelling lists on the inside covers, so students develop a self-selected spelling/vocabulary reference they can employ quickly and easily while writing. There is also an appropriate area at the top of each writing page for an illustration or a graphic organizer such as a word web, which can provide further support vocabulary development and composition.

At the kindergarten and first grade level, students use 48-page monthly journals or an all-purpose version. Second and third graders use 72-page seasonal journals or an all-purpose version. Upper elementary students use *Advanced Journal Writing*, which also has a three-hole-punched version that fits into the binders commonly used by middle school students.

Research cited in the previous section about developing vocabulary and correct spelling also supports the use of writing journals for these purposes. To summarize, research has shown that children learn words best by meeting them many times and in different contexts, which leads to a deep processing of meaning (Dole, Sloan, & Trathen, 1995;



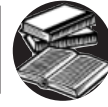
**Journal writing can be used as a stimulus for various stages of the creative process.**

Rosenbaum, 2001). According to Zutell (1978), active involvement in the process of learning to spell results in better learning, and Ehri (1989) suggested that the more students practice, the more words they will be able to spell correctly. Bos & Vaughn (1991) found that most spelling programs placed little emphasis on maintenance of previously learned words, and that there was little support for the ongoing transfer of correct spelling in activities beyond the specific spelling lesson.

The *Words I Use* writing journals enable students to create varied contexts within which the meaning and spelling of new words can be developed and reinforced. This process actively engages the students in learning and provides repeated practice, while also helping students maintain their knowledge and transfer what they have learned to new situations. Moreover, the research on the benefits of self-selected vocabulary/spelling lists (Haggard, 1982; Rapp-Rudell & Shearer, 2002; Fisher, Blachowicz & Smith, 1991; Blachowicz, Fisher, Costa & Pozzi, 1993; Beyersdorfer, 1991) supports the use of the word banks on the journals' inside covers, which can be filled with words that the students want to use when writing, as well as words the students have misspelled in their journal entries and need help spelling correctly.

In addition to helping with spelling and vocabulary development, writing in the *Words I Use* journals also helps students develop their writing abilities. Routman (2000) points out that journal writing can "promote fluency in reading and writing, encourage risk taking, provide opportunities for reflection, and promote the development of written language conventions." With careful monitoring and comments on entries by teachers journal writing becomes an integral and powerful component of writing instruction.

Journal writing can be used as a stimulus for various stages of the creative process, especially when students use their writing to explore their thoughts, feelings, and experiences

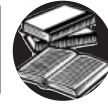


(Connors, 1988). By keeping an ongoing record of their thoughts, students identify topics of special interest, and by writing expressively their language becomes more lyrical and metaphorical (Craig, 1983).

The National Council of Teachers of English, in a series of papers titled *What We Know About Writing* (2003), identifies the following principles as a basis for the development of students' writing:

- The “language arts” develop in concert. Drawing supports writing, writing supports reading; opportunity to use multiple expressions of language increases language learning and ability.
- Language learning proceeds most successfully when students use language for meaningful purposes.
- Writing is effectively used as a tool for thinking and learning throughout the curriculum.
- Language skills conventions [grammar, punctuation, spelling] are most successfully learned with a combination of carefully targeted lessons applied within the context of meaningful writing.
- Experience with a particular kind of writing is the best indicator of performance; extensive reading and writing within a particular genre or domain increases successful performance.
- Assessment that both benefits individual writers and their teachers' instructional planning is embedded within curricular experiences and represented by collections of key pieces of writing created over time.

The journals in the *Words I Use* series align with these principles of writing instruction, starting with the appropriately sized spaces for illustrations or graphic organizers at the top of each journal page. The preparation of drawings or graphic organizers often serves as a helpful prewriting activity for students. In addition, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1985, 1991) made educators more aware that our

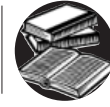


schools mainly prize linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities. For those students whose spatial intelligence may dominate the linguistic, the drawings, graphic organizers, maps, charts, or diagrams may help overcome the block to writing.

To make language learning meaningful, students using the *Words I Use* writing journals can write narratives linked to timely events, which help them learn to express themselves in writing and engage them in writing about personally meaningful experiences. Yet the open-ended format of the journals also enables them to be used for expository writing and cross-curricular purposes, so that new vocabulary and correct spelling from all subject areas can be practiced and internalized. At the same time, students are developing and applying other knowledge and skills in a meaningful way.

Rather than using the blank area at the top of each journal page for an illustration, students have the option of using it for a graphic organizer. Studies have shown the effectiveness of using graphic forms such as semantic feature charts (Johnson, Toms-Bronowski, & Pittleman, 1982; Anders, Bos, & Filip, 1984), advanced organizers (Herber, 1978), or maps and webs (Heimlich & Pittman, 1982). Some students prefer to draw or use Venn diagrams, time lines, bar or line graphs, concept ladders or semantic gradients (Blachowicz, 1986) or a thinking tree (Nagy, 1988). The *Words I Use* journals give students the flexibility to choose the strategy most meaningful to them, and all journal pages include an appropriately sized space for students to use.

Over time, the writing collected in the *Words I Use* journals serves as an authentic assessment or portfolio that documents learning and progress. On a short-term basis, daily or weekly writing reveals which specific language conventions students are mastering, and which ones need further instructional support and practice. The self-selected word collections students compile in the word banks inside the covers of the journals also provide valuable information about students' thinking and progress.



### **Words I Use Reading Response Journals**

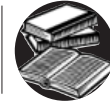
Beginning at the third grade level with *Writing about Reading* (grades 3–4) and in later grades with *Advanced Writing about Reading* (grades 5-6), students have additional opportunities to build their vocabularies, practice correct spelling, and develop other writing skills by responding to reading in ways that also help increase comprehension.

*Writing about Reading* provides students with a series of two-page units that include sections for pre- and post-reading activities, an illustration or graphic organizer, a writing prompt, and an extended written response to what was read. The last pages of this response journal provide prompts for writing about character, setting, and plot, plus blank lines for additional prompts appropriate for particular students or books. The inside back cover has a word bank that becomes a personalized vocabulary/spelling reference.

*Advanced Writing about Reading* has a similar format but focuses more on the stages of the reading process, with sections of each two-page unit for writing before, during, and after reading. The last pages provide questions and strategies for each of these stages, and the inside covers have a template for creating book lists that summarize the title, author, and genre of each book written about in the journal.

There is significant research that journals help tie together reading and writing and give students opportunities to construct their own personal meanings (Atwell, 1987; Harste et al., 1988; Parsons, 1990; Tierney, Readence & Dishner, 1990; & Weaver, 1990 in Cooper, 1997). Writing about books focuses students on what they have read and helps the student develop and express personal reactions to the text. And to initiate this type of written response, it is helpful for the teacher to provide a prompt or “sentence starter”—a potential main-idea statement or thesis statement (Kirby et al, 1986).

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Responding to reading in this way requires students to actively process the information they need in order to complete a writing task in their journals. This adheres to research on brain-based learning, which is the consolidation and internalization of information by the learner in a way that is both personally meaningful and conceptually coherent (Caine & Caine, 1999). It is the path to understanding rather than simple memorization.

First, however, the section for writing prior to reading initiates the activation of prior knowledge. This section is supported by research that prior knowledge enhances comprehension. (Ogle, 1989). Langer (1984) found that activating prior knowledge significantly improves comprehension and does not simply motivate children's interest in reading. Other researchers have shown that previews of text help to increase students' comprehension of explicit and implicit information (Graves & Cooke, 1980, in Barr et. al., 1991). And assignments with "prewriting" question-listing activities resulted in essays of higher quality than did assignments with no prewriting (Appelmann, 1986; Kern, 1983; Reilly, Beach, & Crabtree, 1986; in Barr et. al., 1991). Graves, Cooke and Leberge (1983) claim that this may be a particularly useful strategy for unsuccessful readers who do not engage in strategies spontaneously (in Barr, et. al., 1991).

The effects that writing about literature had upon thinking and learning were explored in the work of Marshall (1987) and Salvatori (1985). Marshall, for example, found that when students were involved in personal and formal writing about literature, they approached literature from a more diverse set of literary perspectives. Other research shows that all readers take an "aesthetic stance" to literature, and in the aesthetic stance the reader pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that the words of the text evoke (Rosenblatt, 1994; 1978; Clifford, 1991; Farrell & Squire, 1990). In reading and responding to expository or informational material, an "efferent stance" is usually



assumed. Both the aesthetic and efferent stances are developed by and reflected in students' writing about what they have read.

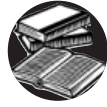
In this transactional theory of the relationship between the reader and the text, writing about reading can play a vital role in developing students' stances, presenting them for reaction by the teacher, and preserving them for further review. Although most theorists and researchers in literary response ascribe varying degrees of importance to reader and text in the creation of meaning, most view the process as somewhat transactional in nature (deBeaugrande, 1988; Eagleton, 1983; Freund, 1987; Ray, 1984; in Barr et. al., 1991).

Along with their contributions to the reading process, the *Words I Use* reading response journals help students develop their writing abilities. Like the writing journals, the reading response journals correlate with key principles cited by the NCTE, such as the support provided by drawing, as well as the learning of language skills conventions within the context of meaningful writing. The NCTE also points out that extensive reading and writing within a particular genre or domain increases successful performance, and these journals focus students on important aspects of particular genres while also providing extensive opportunities to write about them.

In addition to supporting reading comprehension and writing, the *Words I Use* reading response journals help students develop their thinking skills. Writing about reading helps students learn to organize their thoughts about the text, and habitually writing in response to reading helps students learn to clarify and refine their thoughts (Wells, 1993 and Brookes, 1988 in Cobine, 2004).

As informal assessments, the *Words I Use* reading response journals can provide valuable insights about students' reading, writing, and thinking, while also documenting the students' progress. The journals reveal the

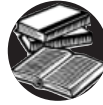
***Words I Use* reading response journals help students develop their thinking skills. Writing about reading helps students learn to organize their thoughts about the text, and habitually writing in response to reading helps students learn to clarify and refine their thoughts**



types of books students have read, as well as how their conceptual and written responses have changed and grown. The value of this information is supported by the NCTE's statement: "Assessment that both benefits individual writers and their teachers' instructional planning is embedded within curricular experiences and represented by collections of key pieces of writing created over time."

### **Conclusion**

Due to the vital roles of spelling and vocabulary in both reading and writing, the *Words I Use* series helps students develop a wide range of literacy skills, doing so in a research-based, sequential manner. Moreover, the open-ended formats and emphasis on self-selection engage students in active learning and generate feelings of ownership of the material, which also contribute to the series' effectiveness.



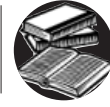
**Anna M. Cimochoowski, Ph.D.**, was a classroom teacher, reading teacher, and director of reading and communication arts in the Hartford, CT school district. She also served as the district's Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, and later as the Assistant Superintendent of Support Services.

At colleges and universities in Connecticut, Dr. Cimochoowski has taught numerous language arts and vocational education courses to graduate students and undergraduates. In addition, she has authored several education books, served as an Educational Policy Fellow in Washington, D.C., and was a Fellow with Yale University's Haskins Laboratory and with Connecticut's Early Reading Success Project.

Dr. Cimochoowski currently resides in Arizona and continues to work as an educational consultant.

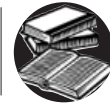
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