As students progress into the secondary grades, the ability to convey ideas and learning through writing becomes increasingly important. Students in the United States overwhelmingly struggle with writing, and this achievement has important consequences as students move past K-12 education into college and beyond. The writing demanded of students in the secondary grades requires that students state a position and support that position, and this relies on students’ ability to present their writing using academic language, a register requiring knowledge of specialized language forms. Little is known about what early attempts at academic language writing look like, in particular how students marshal their language resources to try and make persuasive arguments, which leaves the field with little information to use in making instructional decisions.

This research program takes a fine-grained approach to looking at how students explicitly use academic language in their persuasive essays. The current dataset is one of the largest ever assembled for close study at the middle school level, studying approximately 750 essays on a variety of topics written by 179 middle graders over the course of a supplemental vocabulary intervention. The studies being conducted analyze this data closely for a variety of language features ranging from word-level to discourse-level structures, providing us with heretofore unknown information about students' writing development.

Biographical Sketch
Christina Dobbs is an advanced doctoral student in Human Development and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, completing her dissertation about the academic language writing of middle graders. Her research interests include academic language development, the argumentative writing of students, and writing instruction. She has presented her work as a member of the Society for Scientific Study of Reading, the American Educational Research Association, the Literacy Research Association, and the International Reading Association. She has served as an adjunct instructor at Lesley University, Hunter College, Simmons College, and Salem State University and as a consultant for the Cambridge Public Schools, Boston Public Schools, and Concord School District in New Hampshire. She served as the Manuscripts Editor for the Harvard Educational Review, and she edited a volume titled Humanizing Education: Critical Alternatives to Reform. She is a former high school teacher in Houston, Texas, as well as a literacy coach, and reading specialist.