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Family Message Journals: A tool for writing instruction combined with parent involvement

Sandi Michele McCann
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Sandi McCann

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2008

ABSTRACT

Family Message Journals:

A Tool for Writing Instruction Combined With Parental Involvement

by

Sandi Michele McCann

S. Ed., Troy University, Phenix City, 1993

M. Ed., Troy University, Phenix City, 1991

B.S. Ed. Columbus State University, 1989

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership

Walden University

September 2008

ABSTRACT

Mandates on reading and math achievement in elementary education in rural Georgia have led to a decline in writing proficiency as the subject becomes increasingly neglected. At the same time, schools strive to increase parental involvement programs. Consequently, there is a need for more research on the impact of parental involvement on student writing proficiency. Accordingly, this qualitative case study examined the impact of Family Message Journals (FMJ) and parent participation on teaching writing across the curriculum. Participants included 6 third-graders and their parents. Students wrote in journals 4 days per week across the 4 months of the study, and parents provided parallel responses each night. Student entries were examined and coded by academic subject and the 4 domains of the Georgia Writing Assessment Rubric to document students' growth in specific writing skills; parental responses were coded according to the type of response. Inductive analysis was used to analyze and interpret structured interview data to document emergent themes and search for patterns of meaning. All FMJ data were triangulated in a data source matrix with interviews of parents and students to explore linkages across sources. Findings revealed that (a) using FMJ increased students' writing ability, (b) teaching writing across the curriculum provided time for writing instruction, (c) comprehension was enhanced in subject content areas, and (d) parents felt more informed and appreciated. This study will prove beneficial for educators desiring to include writing without compromising time in currently mandated content areas, and also for parents who want to be informed, involved, and empowered. Teachers using FMJ can initiate social change by preparing more proficient students with a positive attitude for writing. Ideally, these attributes will build and follow these students into the workforce.

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DEDICATION

This journey is dedicated to those who love and support me the most. All of you, in your own way, helped make my dream come true.

Ryan, I'll never view eggs in the same way again. I share this honor with you just as I give you my heart. You deserve this degree and the title that accompanies it as much as I do. I owe you for your countless hours (literally) of holding down the fort single-handedly while I "Waldened" away my days and nights. This entire experience would not be possible without your dedication, support, and unending love. You will never know how much it means to me that you believed in my dream just as much as I did. It was only with your loving encouragement (and eggs) that I was able to hang in there. I love you so much. You ARE my heart and soul and I cannot imagine why I am so blessed to be your wife, but I thank God every day that I am.

Colton, this new degree will pad my retirement so maybe I won't have to move in with you, your wife, and your children in my old age!

Collin, you can play your video games in the study as loud as you want to now!

Chason, thank you for your genuine and sincere interest in what I was doing, and understanding why I was doing it. Thank you for being proud of me.

Morgan, no more watching Annalise while I work on my papers! Thank you so much for all your help.

Chandler, next time you ask, "Mommy, do you have work to do?" I am going to say, "No! None!" And Chandler, I will always remember my "breakfast at computer."

Annalise, remind me when you are older to tell you the story of changing your diaper on the floor of our study while I was in the middle of a teleconference!

I love all of you so much and am grateful for your understanding these last three years. I never wanted to sacrifice any time with any of you, but dreams take hard work and time that must come from somewhere. Someday, when you grow up with dreams of your own, I pray that you will remember this time and understand the effort and dedication that makes dreams come true. I pray that maybe I can be an inspiration to your own dreams. I look forward to watching your dreams come true, too!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

“Children want to write” (Graves, 2003, p.vii). Graves acknowledged that those words ring as true in his 20th anniversary of *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* as they did in the 1983 version of the same title. In the new edition, however, was added, “If we let them” (Graves, p. vii). Graves was referring to the lack of time devoted to writing instruction in today’s curricula geared toward high-stakes testing:

Teachers are hard pressed to find time for anything. Curricula are inflated, classroom interruptions rampant, the children overstimulated. Time for teaching is meted out into tiny eight- to ten-minute slots, just to *cover* the required curriculum. Writing has never taken hold in American education because it has been given so little time. (Graves, p. 90)

Sterling, Executive Director of the National Writing Project, concurred, “Writing, as many educators have noted recently, remains the ‘silent R’ in the traditional triad of what students need to learn” (Sterling, as cited in Nagin, 2006, p. x). As a result, there is an awakening, of sorts, to bring writing back to the forefront (Nagin, 2006; National Commission on Writing, 2003; 2004; 2005). According to Nagin (2006), “Despite repeated ‘back-to-basics’ efforts, the need for improving student writing persists” (p. 2).

Family Message Journals may be one strategy for writing instruction that will bring writing back to the forefront of the curriculum (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Family Message Journals permit writing instruction to take place across the curriculum, allowing writing instruction to fit in practically within the school day (Wollman-Bonilla). Family Message Journals aims to join the benefits of journals and parental involvement as a tool for writing instruction. As an added benefit, these journals’ partnership with parents, according to Wollman-Bonilla , provide an authentic audience and purpose for writing.

Studies have found journals beneficial for increasing student interest and improving students' attitudes about writing (Eastman, 1997; Park, 2003). The Eastman study found that both educators and students alike praise journals for allowing active, personal engagement while learning.

“Few concepts in the education debate win approval across a wider philosophical spectrum than does parent involvement; everybody is for it” (Pape, 1999, p. 47). Families and schools have worked together since the beginning of formalized schooling, but the nature and collaboration has evolved over the years (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). Research overwhelmingly supports parental involvement in schools and most parents want to be involved in their child's schooling (Biggs, 2001). Family Message Journals aim to invite parental participation in a meaningful way while motivating children to write (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).

Problem Statement

Writing is one major casualty of the growing curricula facing teachers (National Commission on Writing, 2003). In *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution* (The Commission, 2003), the Commission reported that writing has not been given the full attention it deserves since the release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) 20 years ago and now must become a central focus of the school agenda (College Board – Press Release, 2003).

At the same time, schools need parents more than ever before (Marzano, 2003). Although studies over the last 30 years identified a strong link between parent involvement in school and increased student achievement, enhanced self-esteem,

improved behavior, and better school attendance, family involvement in U.S. schools remains minimal (Comer, 2005; Corday & Wilson, 2004; Mapp, 1997). In addition, writing skills are declining, teachers are finding little or no time to include writing instruction, and parental involvement remains weak (National Writing Commission, 2003). Family Message Journals may be a strategy to address these dilemmas.

The problem is there is little research with older students combining the two strategies of journal writing with parental involvement. Wollman-Bonilla (2000) conducted the first formal, published research on these particular journals with first graders. A few small studies have since surfaced (Horton, in Moore, 2004; Canfield Inquiry Projects, 2004). However, most data has been gathered from kindergarten, first, or second grade students. As a result, there is a need for further research to explore how journals can be used as an effective strategy for teaching writing across the curriculum while using parental participation. More specifically, there is little information on utilizing Family Message Journals with older students.

Nature of the Study

The basic concept of this study was to combine adequate time for writing instruction across the curriculum, journal writing, and parental involvement. The combination of these three tools makes up the premise of Family Message Journals. For the purpose of this study, Family Message Journals are defined, according to Wollman-Bonilla (2000), as “notebooks in which children write a message to their families each day about something they did or learned or thought about in school, and a family member

(or other willing adult, aside from the classroom teacher) writes a message in reply” (p. 2).

This qualitative case study explored the effectiveness of Family Message Journals as a writing strategy. According to Creswell (1998), a case study is “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ of a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61). This case study design was chosen, as the “case” is identified as the teacher researcher’s classroom and its use of Family Message Journals as a tool for writing instruction. The case was bounded by time and place.

Extensive, multiple sources of information were used in data collection to provide a detailed, in-depth picture of the effectiveness of the strategy, as characteristic of a typical case study. These sources of information include studying background information on the case study students, studying the journals as artifacts, conducting interviews with both student participants and their parents, and writing in a reflective journal.

The researcher’s elementary school is located in a rural county in West Central Georgia. A convenience sample of the researcher’s class was utilized. The class consisted of 15 third grade students, heterogeneously grouped. Of this convenience sample of 15 students, the researcher chose 6 students for the case study. The students were not necessarily chosen to give the sample a variety of academic ability but instead, for what the students may be able to contribute to the study.

The researcher served as an active participant observer and facilitator, guiding students in writing instruction. Materials for this study were minimal; each student was

provided a composition book and followed the third grade curriculum under the Georgia Performance Standards.

Writing in Family Message Journals approximately 4 days per week, the entries were used to document students' growth in writing ability including, but not limited to, handwriting, mechanics, usage and expression, and content. The students' Family Message Journals served as the primary artifacts. This data generated from the journal entry artifacts were triangulated with one-on-one, unstructured open-ended interviews of both parents and students, which was conducted toward the end of the study period. Qualitative analysis was used to analyze and interpret data. The researcher minimized threats to quality by recording observations and recollections immediately and accurately in a reflective journal, reporting fully, including discrepancies, and seeking peer assistance to investigate contradictions in data collection and analysis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how Family Message Journals, with parent participation, can affect students' writing ability. There is little research combining these two powerful strategies. This study will contribute to the literature and expand upon ways to use Family Message Journals to improve writing skills in elementary school students.

Research Questions

The central question to be explored in this study was: Can writing instruction using Family Message Journals improve third grade students' writing ability?

The study will also seek to answer the following subsidiary questions:

1. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum?
2. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals as a tool for improving communication skills in elementary school students?
3. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education?

Theoretical Framework

“More attention must be paid to writing. More time must be found for it,” proclaimed The National Commission on Writing (2003, p. 21) in *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*. In the first of its three reports, The Commission reported findings that most students spend little time writing. The suggestions garnered from their in-depth study included doubling the amount of time students write, writing across the curriculum, and using parents as writing partners.

In a discussion on theoretical foundations, Creswell (1998) offered, “Social science theories might be absent from the study with a focus on a description of the case and its issues” (Stake, 1995, p. 87). However, Family Message Journals encompass all three suggestions from The Commission's Report. To that end, this study was dual faceted,

based on Marzano's theory of parental involvement (Marzano, 2003), as well as the learning-centered paradigm (McManus, 2001).

Use of parental involvement sets this type of journal apart from all others, and is the key to the success of the strategy (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Marzano (2003) defined his theory of parental involvement by three features: communication, participation, and governance. Marzano asserted that parental involvement increases student achievement and motivation, but "it is the responsibility of the school to initiate communication and provide an atmosphere in which parents desire such communication" (p. 48). Family Message Journals are based on this theory, which invites parental participation in a meaningful, nonthreatening atmosphere (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).

Schools are beginning to take more action, taking advantage of parents as resources. According to *Curriculum Review* (2005), "Knowing that parental involvement can help students soar to new academic heights, schools are pulling out all the stops to make moms and dads a more active part of the learning community" (p. 11).

The second facet of this study is based on the learning-centered paradigm (McManus, 2001). This theory, "situates learners at the centre of the experience, empowers and motivates them to assume responsibility for their own learning, and adopts teaching and learning strategies designed to encourage students to see themselves as thinkers and problem-solvers" (McManus, as cited in Park, 2003, p. 183). Park contended that "Students who actively engage with what they are studying tend to understand more, learn more, remember more, enjoy it more and be more able to appreciate the relevance of what they have learned, than students who passively receive what we teach them" (p. 183). In the learning-centered paradigm, the process of learning

is as important as the content, and students develop skills for lifelong learning (McManus).

With the learning-centered paradigm in mind, this study used journals as the tool for reflection. Writing in their Family Message Journals, students reflect on their own learning experience, actively engaging in what they are studying. Research has shown that journal writing has been welcomed as a learning tool and, as Park (2003) asserted, is “widely recognized as one way of communicating the importance of writing” (p. 183). Park reported that learning journals increase student interest; encourage and empower students, allowing them to take responsibility for learning reflection; and allow a voice to provide feedback to the teacher.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined or explained:

Writing ability: In this study, writing ability refers to the students’ successful use of components in the four major domains from the Georgia Writing Assessment rubric. Those domains are: Ideas, Organization, Style, and Conventions. The extensive, detailed rubric mandates different requirements for each genre of writing, though the rubric for Conventions remains the same for all genres. Components of Conventions include: Sentence Formation, Usage, and Mechanics. Each component of each domain also contains several Elements, creating a powerful assessment tool for such a subjective subject (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

Across the curriculum: Topics for the Family Message Journal entries will vary by subject, with students writing about concepts in math, language arts, science, social studies, and extracurricular activities. Students will explore genre as they learn informational, narrative, and persuasive writing. Students may also compose poetry or songs.

Written Communication Skills: In this study, written communication skills refers to the students' ability to demonstrate audience awareness, to clearly convey the message to the reader. In other words, the goal is not to merely relate the facts but to bear in mind that the student's family was not present at school, and the writer must paint a picture enhanced with details, which reflects the writer's voice.

Improving communication skills: In studies conducted by Wollman-Bonilla (2000), Horton (2002), and the Canfield Writing Project (2004), all three determined writing improvement and improvement in communication skills by simply comparing Family Message Journal entries of the case study students at the beginning, middle, and end of the data collection period. This researcher will follow suite, guided by the criteria from the Georgia Writing Assessment.

Family Message Journals: For the purpose of this study, Family Message Journals are defined, according to Wollman-Bonilla (2000), as "notebooks in which children write a message to their families each day about something they did or learned or thought about in school, and a family member (or other willing adult, aside from the classroom teacher) writes a message in reply" (p. 2).

Writing: According to the National Commission on Writing (2003), “While exercises in descriptive, creative, and narrative writing help develop students’ skills, writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions” (p. 13).

“Meaningful” Parental Involvement: Parental involvement is meaningful when the parents seek opportunities to interact with their children at school, or if they engage in schoolwork with their children that is perceived to have significance or worthwhile purpose (Bailey, 2004). Some parental involvement may be considered more “meaningful” than others (Christie, 2005). Simply checking over homework is not considered meaningful, whereas a family project to complete together is. When given opportunities to be involved, many parents become active participants (Powell, 1989).

Georgia Performance Standards: Performance standards go into much greater depth than the content standards used in the previous curriculum. The performance standard incorporates the content standard, which simply tells the teacher what a student is expected to know (i.e., what concepts he or she is expected to master), and expands upon it by providing three additional items: suggested tasks, sample student work, and teacher commentary on that work. Performance standards provide clear expectations for assessment, instruction, and student work. They define the level of work that demonstrates achievement of the standards, enabling a teacher to know “how good is good enough.” The performance standards isolate and identify the skills needed to use the knowledge and skills to problem-solve, reason, communicate, and make connections with other information. Performance standards also tell the teacher how to assess the extent to

which the student knows the material or can manipulate and apply the information (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

Georgia Writing Assessment: Overview of Grades 3, 5, 8, and 11: Georgia's performance-based writing assessments are administered to students in grades three, five, eight, and eleven. Student writing samples are evaluated on an analytic scoring system in all grades to provide diagnostic feedback to teachers, students, and parents about individual performance (see Appendix A). The writing assessments provide information to students about their writing performance and areas of strength and challenge. This information is useful for instruction and preparation for future writing assessments (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). The researcher used this rubric to develop codes for writing errors (see Appendix B).

Assumptions

While conducting this research, the researcher made the following assumptions:

1. The class of participants will be heterogeneously grouped in terms of student ability.
2. The students willingly participate in writing in Family Message Journals.
3. Parents will participate in responding in Family Message Journals.
4. Participants, both students and parents, will respond honestly in interviews.

Scope, Limitations, and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to third graders in the researcher's self-contained classroom as well as their families. The study focused on the affect of Family

Message Journals on third grade students' writing ability. Writing improvement was the most important element evaluating the effectiveness of Family Message Journals. Since lack of adequate time in the school day for writing instruction has been identified as a factor in declining writing ability, practicality of implementation of the strategy, as well as its flexibility to be implemented across the curriculum, was to be explored. The results of this research study are not generalizable to any other population because only students in the researcher's classroom participated in the study.

Parents and students participated in open ended interviews to discover their perspectives of the strategy. Successful data from the interviews depended upon the number of interviews completed and the accuracy of responses. With all interviews, it is possible to have discrepancies between comments by participants and their actual, sincere beliefs.

Another possible weakness in this study included sample size, as this case study focused on a few select students with different ability levels. Lack of ethnic diversity could be an issue. Socioeconomic status, as well as other demographic information, will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

Many researchers have reported the benefits of journal writing (Park, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989, 2000; Slinger, 1997; Regan, 2003). Researchers have long touted accolades for parental involvement in school as well (Pape, 1999; Sattes, 1989; National Commission on Writing, 2003; Marzano, 2003). However, few studies have examined the use of parents as resources in combination with the reflective benefits of

learning journals. One study (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000) researched Family Message Journals in a small case study of first graders. Another teacher-researcher (Horton, as reported in Moore, 2004) documented her successful use of Family Message Journals with her kindergartners. However, both of these studies examined emerging readers and writers and focused more on growth in reading ability. This study explored the use of Family Message Journals on third graders, focusing more on writing instruction across the curriculum and reflection as a higher order thinking skill. Because formal writing instruction is being increasingly removed from the curriculum, this study will prove beneficial for curriculum directors and teachers who want to include meaningful writing instruction without compromising time in content areas. Successfully including parents in the process is a bonus that will interest any educator.

Implications for Social Change

With focus on reading and math achievement, writing has been increasingly neglected (National Commission on Writing, 2003; Christopher, et al., 2000; Martin, et al., 2005). Now educators, as well as society as a whole, must address the consequence, which is the decline of writing proficiency (The Commission, 2003). In 2003, the College Board created the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges to focus national attention on the teaching and learning of writing. This first report, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution* (National Commission on Writing, 2003), contended, writing has not been given the full attention it deserves since the release of *A Nation at Risk* 20 years ago (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and must now become a central focus of the school agenda (College

Board–Press Release, 2003). According to Commission member Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, “While trying to improve math, science and technology in our schools, we’ve neglected writing (College Board Press Release, 2004). The Commission proposed a five-year national Writing Challenge led by former senator and governor Bob Kerrey, now president of New School University in New York City. Suggestions included, “assigning writing across the curriculum, at least doubling the time students spend on writing, and investing in research to aid both students and teachers in writing instruction” (The Commission, 2003, p. 35).

The Commission released its second report to Congress in September 2004. This document, entitled *Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out*, centered on writing proficiency in the private sector. The press release reports corporations spend several billion dollars annually improving writing among employees (College Board–Press Release, 2004). A survey revealed 80% of respondents assess writing during hiring, one CEO noting applicants who provide poorly written letters wouldn’t likely get an interview (The Commission, 2004).

Recently, the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges published its 2005 report. Entitled *Writing: A Powerful Message from State Government*, this document surveys state human resources directors. “Findings reveal that although good writing is considered an even more important job requirement among state governments’ nearly 2.7 million employees than it is in the private sector, a significant number of public employees do not meet states’ expectations” (The Commission, 2005, p. 6). This deficiency not only hinders state governments’ effectiveness and efficiency, the cost to improve employees’ writing skills far exceeds

their budgets. According to last year's report, the Commission estimates American firms may spend \$3.1 billion educating their employees (The Commission, 2004, p. 37).

These findings from the National Writing Commission (2003, 2004, 2005) imply not only that the writing proficiency of our society is, as a whole, deficient, but that the inadequacy worsens every year. Among those employees considered professionals, many are highly qualified on paper. More than half of the private sector earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Despite their education, many lack the ability to do analysis, develop recommendations, and show the basis for recommendations (The Commission, 2005). Educational leaders must find a means to return writing to its proper significance in the curriculum (The Commission, 2003). Family Message Journals may be one such strategy, while at the same time, empowering parents as stakeholders in the process.

Summary

This qualitative case study explored the impact of writing instruction across the curriculum, through Family Message Journals, on third grade students' writing ability. Also explored were the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum, the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals as a tool for improving written communication skills, and the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education. Participants included the researcher's third grade students, and the researcher served as an active participant observer. Students wrote in journals 4 days per week. Entries

consisted of topics learned or thought about in school. Parents responded each evening in kind. The journals were examined later, as artifacts, to document students' growth in writing. Thoughts and observations noted in the researcher's Reflective Journal were triangulated with one on one, open-ended interviews with both parents and students. Qualitative analysis was used to analyze and interpret data. Threats to validity were minimized as described by the researcher.

Chapter 2 provides a review of current literature regarding writing instruction, journal writing, and parental involvement. In chapter 3, research methodology is described. Chapter 4 provides a presentation and analysis of data. Finally, chapter 5 offers a summary, conclusions, recommendations, and reflection.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This qualitative case study examined the effectiveness of Family Message Journals as a strategy for writing instruction. Family Message Journals are unique in that parental involvement is a major focus of the strategy. This type of writing instruction allows teachers the opportunity to incorporate writing throughout the curriculum, offering flexibility and practicality (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).

Three themes emerged from a review of the literature: writing and its components, journals, and parental involvement. Thus, these themes will be discussed in detail in the literature review. The review will also include a section on Family Message Journals, which will describe the journals and the research conducted by Wollman-Bonilla. This section will further explain how the three themes are important components in Family Message Journals. The literature review will conclude with other previous research regarding Family Message Journals and justification for the research methodology.

Writing

Writing Instruction

“Children want to write” (Graves, 2003, p. 3). “Writers want to be heard” (Calkins, 1994, p. 15). Graves and Calkins are two of the foremost respected authors on the subject of writing.. But, some teachers are unsure of how to go about writing instruction (Calkins, 2005; Nagin, 2006). Calkins (1994) poetically contended that teachers should let the children show us how to teach:

When we help children know that their lives do matter, we are teaching writing...As we take lessons from children, we demonstrate to them that their lives are worth writing about. We help our students know what they know – and that is essential...Teaching is a matter of faith. (p. 16)

Many teachers are unsure how to go about writing instruction (Calkins, 2005; Nagin, 2006). Teachers find themselves reluctant to develop a writing program. “Many primary-grade teachers in today’s schools struggle to understand how children develop writing skill, when writing instruction should begin, and how to organize and implement a writing program” (Bloodgood, as cited in Martin et al., 2005, p. 237). Some school districts have access to every textbook except writing, and the entire writing curriculum must be teacher-developed (Christopher, Ewald, & Giangrasso, 2000). Professional development may be the answer (Leiberman & Wood, 2003).

Professional Development

Many programs are attempting to update antiquated approaches with more teacher-centered professional development in which participants take a more active role in their own learning, according to recent research. According to Leiberman and Wood (2003), “Most professional development approaches position teachers as passive consumers of prepackaged knowledge or, at best, compliant participants whose role has been to absorb information from the research and reform communities whether or not it is useful or appropriate” (p. 174).

Another trend points toward collegial, rather than competitive relationships between colleagues. Two of the most prolific professional development programs on writing instruction are Writer’s Workshop and the National Writing Project. Both of these projects require professional development to implement, and both advocate teacher

collaboration. The National Writing Project in particular requires teachers to actively participate in their own learning and stresses the vital importance of teacher reflection (Bradley, 2005).

A Writer's Workshop environment was employed for writing instruction when Martin, Seagraves, Thacker, and Young (2005) studied what 3 first grade teachers and their students learned when engaged in the writing process for 1 year. Data were collected through individual teacher and student interviews, student writing samples, and anecdotal observational notes. Results indicated that the importance placed on professional development allowed the teachers time to reflect on their learning in a collaborative teaching environment. The success of the teachers' learning had a profound effect on the students' interest and engagement in the writing process. According to Martin et al. (2005), "Creating reflective, collaborative environments was one way that the teachers overcame any difficulties while implementing their writing programs" (p. 248).

Bayer (1999) and Smith (2006) described similar results after studying Writer's Workshop. Both discovered that using Writer's Workshop elevates the students' confidence and motivates them to achieve. The routine of the strategy was found to be important, as was the systematic organization of materials (Smith).

In 1974, James Gray founded the Bay Area Writing Project. The initial group consisted of 25 successful teachers whom Gray asked to share their expertise about the teaching of writing (Bradley, 2005). Now known as the National Writing Project, the professional development program has grown to 189 university-based sites across the nation, with more than 100,000 teachers taking part each year.

Goldberg (1989) explained that Gray had simply set out to help solve the problem of University of California freshmen students not being able to write by university standards. He had long been thinking about a partnership between the universities and the schools where the universities use the expertise of effective writing teachers. Gradually, Gray formed more fundamental beliefs about the program. He had learned that top-down professional development did not work and that most university professors were too far removed from actual classrooms. He wanted the research knowledge of the university professors, but liked the idea of teachers teaching other teachers. He also felt strongly that in order to effectively teach writing, teachers must do a lot of writing themselves – going through the same writing process their students did. Smith (2006), the director of government relations and public affairs for the National Writing Project explained, “Participants learn from extensive modeling and discussion in the large group how to respond to a draft – in effect, how to invest in another writer’s success” (p. 12).

Leiberman and Wood (2001) are followers of the National Writing Project and, as of this writing, are currently working together to write a book on what they call “one of the oldest and arguably most successful teaching networks in the United States” (p. 176). Leiberman and Wood maintained, “Connecting learning, community, and efficacy, the National Writing Project provides teachers with a variety of opportunities not only to shape ideas for use in their own contexts, but to take leadership in and become members of a larger professional community” (p. 181).

Neglect and its Effect

So if children want to write and writers want to be heard, why then, all across America, is the teaching of writing being sacrificed (Calkins, 1994; College Board, 2003; Graves, 1983; Martin et al., 2005; Nagin, 2006)? State school systems relentlessly attempt to increase student achievement, measured in large part by standardized test scores, and teachers feel pressured to ensure students' success on state tests (Ghezzi, 2002). Accomplishing this goal requires an inordinate amount of time spent on skills mastery for reading and math at the expense of other subjects. In elementary school, writing, science, and social studies get shortchanged, as these subjects are at the end of the day (Black, 2002). Martin et al., (2005) agreed, "In order to have a successful language arts program, writing is a key component that is often overlooked" (p. 239).

Reports of the National Commission on Writing

Consequences of the Sacrifice

The College Board created the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges to focus national attention on the teaching and learning of writing. C. Peter McGrath, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, chaired the Commission. In April 2003, The Commission issued the first of three annual reports to Congress regarding the state of writing proficiency among the nation's students.

2003 – Writing: The Neglected "R"

This first report (National Commission on Writing, 2003) contended writing has not been given the full attention it deserves since the release of *A Nation at Risk* 20 years

ago (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and must now become a central focus of the school agenda (College Board–Press Release, 2003).

Commission members expressed that much of learning improvement focuses on facts, whereas, in their view, “The concept of educational reform must be expanded to include ideas; the ability of students to think, reason, and communicate. To learn, they must write” (The Commission, 2003, p. 9).

The Commission reiterated that lack of time spent learning to write and practicing writing has an impact on weak writing skills:

Few are able to create precise, engaging, coherent prose...Most cannot systematically produce writing at the high levels of skill, maturity, and sophistication required in a complex, modern economy...[Almost all are unable] to create prose that is precise, engaging, and coherent. (2003, p. 16)

In short, it is not that most students cannot write, but that they do not write well.

In this initial report, The Commission proposed a 5-year national Writing Challenge led by former senator and governor Bob Kerrey, now president of New School University in New York City. The Writing Challenge proposed that it “should issue progress reports, map the terrain ahead, and provide assistance to educators on the many details that remain to be ironed out on topics such as assessment and the best use of technology” (The Commission, 2003, p. 35). Other suggestions included assigning writing across the curriculum, at least doubling the time students spend on writing, and investing in research to aid both students and teachers in writing instruction (The Commission, 2003).

2004 – Writing: Your Ticket to Work...Or Your Ticket Out

The National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges released its second report to Congress in September 2004. This document

centered on writing proficiency in the private sector. Sixty-four human resources directors affiliated with Business Roundtable, an association of chief executive officers, completed a survey. The press release reported corporations spent several billion dollars annually improving writing among employees (College Board–Press Release, 2004). The survey revealed 80% of respondents assess writing during hiring, one CEO noting applicants who provide poorly written letters wouldn't likely get an interview (The Commission). Not surprisingly, results further revealed technology has a profound impact in the workplace. One respondent contends:

With the fast pace of today's electronic communications, one might think that the value of fundamental writing skills has diminished in the workplace. Actually, the need to write clearly and quickly has never been more important than in today's highly competitive, technology-driven global community. (The Commission-Press Release, 2004, ¶4)

2005 – Writing: A Powerful Message from State Government

This document surveyed state human resources directors. With responses from 49 of fifty questionnaires, “Findings reveal that although good writing is considered an even more important job requirement among state governments’ nearly 2.7 million employees than it is in the private sector, a significant number of public employees do not meet states’ expectations” (The Commission, 2005, p. 6).

This deficiency not only hinders state governments’ effectiveness and efficiency, the cost to improve employees’ writing skills far exceeds their budgets. Annually, states spend \$221 million (2005, p. 6). According to last year’s report, the Commission estimates American firms may spend \$3.1 billion educating their employees (The Commission, p. 37). As in the private sector, technology plays an important role,

especially e-mail. One would assume electronic mail would make communication easier. On the contrary, miscommunication is common. One employer maintained, “The sender is composing on the spot. You might do a spell-check, but you can’t do a thought check” (The Commission-Press Release, 2005, ¶6).

These findings from the National Writing Commission imply that not only is writing proficiency of our society as a whole dismal, but the inadequacy worsens every year. Among those employees considered professionals, many are highly qualified on paper, as more than half of the private sector earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. However, despite their education, many lack the ability to do analysis, develop recommendations, and show the basis for recommendations (The Commission, 2005).

The Time Factor

With the growing curricula facing teachers today, writing instruction is often the first to go (Martin et al., 2005). Researchers agreed that if children are to become better writers, they must be given the opportunity to practice the craft (Graves, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Nagin (2006) agreed, “Learning to write requires frequent, supportive practice” (p. 12).

A report published by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning (April, 1994) revealed that after what has been called “the new work of the schools – education about public safety, consumer affairs, AIDS, family life, driver’s training... the school day, nominally six periods, is easily reduced to about three hours a day for core academic instruction” (National Education Commission, 1994, section entitled *Academic Time and Nonacademic Activities*).

Graves felt strongly that writing had not been given its proper place in American education because so little time is allotted.

Teachers are hard pressed to find time for anything. Curricula are inflated, classroom interruptions rampant, the children overstimulated. Time for teaching is meted out into tiny eight-to-ten-minute slots, just to *cover* the required curriculum. (Graves, 2003, p. 90)

Writing instruction is time consuming (Graves, 2003). Time is in short supply (Martin et al., 2005). Researchers have found that in many schools, only about half the school day is used for instruction. The other half is spent on transfers, discipline matters, and dead time, during which students are allowed to waste time, and participate in activities unrelated to learning (Cotton, 2001). The half of the school day that is actually used for learning is often dominated by reading and math due to pressure exerted on teachers as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (Ghezzi, 2002). Therefore, one must look for any opportunities to teach writing.

Writing Across the Curriculum

If the school day is half what it appears to be, and if what is left of the school day is taken up primarily by reading and math, then teachers must be creative and proactive in order to include writing instruction. Graves (2003) asserted, “Teachers find the time for writing by taking it” (p. 90). He explained that students should write a minimum of three days a week, but four or five are better, and for a strong experience in writing, at least four 45- to 50-minute periods are necessary. Writing across the curriculum is one way to find time (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).

In its 2003 report, The National Writing Commission advocated writing across the curriculum. The concept of doubling writing time is feasible because of the near-

total neglect of writing outside the English departments (The Commission, 2003).

Nagin (2006), “makes the case that students need to write more across all content areas and that schools need to expand their writing curricula to involve students in a range of writing tasks” (p. 6).

Family Message Journals incorporate writing across the curriculum on a regular basis. Including writing instruction with the content area is less time-consuming than an isolated writing lesson. Wollman-Bonilla described the cross-curricular journal entries:

Assigned topics and genres require children to write on a regular basis about activities and knowledge related to all subject areas. The teachers deliberately plan for the children to write on a wide range of subjects because writing helps them learn in all areas while also exploring the various types of writing used in specific disciplines and for specific real-world purposes. (2000, p. 30)

Recommendations

Numerous recommendations are available to educators:

1. Start young. When it comes to writing instruction, the sooner children get started, the better (Bintz & Dillard, 2004; Jacobs, 2004; Lamme, Fu, Johnson, & Savage, 2002; National Commission on Writing, 2003; Scully & Roberts, 2002). The Commission suggests, “Incorporate writing opportunities for every student from the earliest years of school through secondary school” (2003, p. 34).
2. Write often. The Commission (2003), as part of its “writing revolution,” asked that policies aim to double the amount of time students spend writing. Other research backs up the finding that practice may not make perfect, but it certainly makes it better (Bintz & Dillard, 2004; Graves, 1983; Kramer, 1990; Lamme, Fu, Johnson, & Savage, 2002).

3. Time factor. Allow plenty of time appropriate for the age group (The Commission, 2003; Kramer, 1990).
4. Make it real. Provide authentic audience, authentic purpose; allow invented spelling (The Commission, 2003; Kramer, 1990; Lamme, Fu, Johnson, & Savage, 2002).
5. Write across the curriculum. Not just for language arts anymore (The Commission, 2003).
6. Use different genres. Instruct different kinds of writing for different purposes (The Commission, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).
7. Assignments outside the classroom. Show students practical real-life purposes for writing (The Commission, 2003; Graves, 1983; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).
8. Parent involvement. Many studies show achievement increases with parent involvement (Amberjack, 1995; Baum, 2003; Biggs, 2001; The Commission, 2003; Ginsburg & Bernstein, 1993; Hamner, 2002; Ho Suit Chug & Wills, 1996; Marjoribanks, 1979; Pape, 1999; Sattes, 1989; Steinberg, Darling, Dornbusch, & Lamborn, 1992; Taylor, 1997; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).
9. Make it fun. (The Commission, 2003; Scully & Roberts, 2002; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Scully and Roberts affirm, “Children whose early literacy experiences include pleasurable activities are more motivated to pursue the challenging tasks associated with learning and are more likely to develop a life-long love of reading and writing” (p. 93).

Journals

Defined

Webster's defines *journal* as, "a record of experiences, ideas, or reflections kept regularly for private use (Online Ed., 2005). Hedlund et al. pointed out, "As a literary form, the journal falls roughly between a diary and the log: it consists of regular, though not necessarily daily, entries by which the writer focuses and reflects upon a given theme or a series of events and experiences" (as cited in Park, 2003, p. 184).

Types of Journals

Numerous forms of the basic journal exist. Many varieties used by educators are valuable learning tools. Some of them are just basic journals and some have special uses for specific populations. Below is a list of some of the types of journals available for teachers to implement in their classrooms (Wollman-Bonilla, 1999, 2000; Caggiano, 2004; Baffile, 2005; Regan, 2003; Park, 2003; Slinger, 1997). Because of their monikers, the purposes of most of the journals are obvious:

1. Personal Journal
2. Topical Autobiography
3. Picture Journal
4. Literature Response Journal
5. Reading Response Journal
6. Student Journal
7. Daily Exit Slips

8. Dialogue Journal
9. Reading Journal
10. Learning Journal
11. Learning Log
12. Family Message Journal
13. Life Stories

Benefits of Journal Writing

Researchers have shown that journals validate self-expression and personal response, encourage understanding, imagining, speculation, questioning, and the shaping of ideas, and provide students with information relevant to their concerns and problems in the content of their own entries and their teacher's responses (Atwell, 1984; Mayher, Lester, & Pradl, 1983).

Other studies have found journals beneficial for increasing student interest and improving students' attitudes about writing (Eastman, 1997; Park, 2003). When interest and attitudes improve, achievement follows (Caggiano, 2004; The Commission, 2003; Hyers, 2001). Students appreciate the journal's ability to give them a voice and a true audience (Carr, 2002). Educators and students alike praise journals for allowing active, personal engagement while learning. Students are not mere passive learners receiving information, but reflecting on material learned, refining their own understanding as well (Carr, 2002; Carter, 1997; Hyers, 2001; Park, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 1995).

Journals may be used as a valuable strategy for informal assessment. Journals have the flexibility to introduce and practice different genres (Carr, 2002; Wollman-Bonilla, 1995). Students may express what they feel, or may reveal the extent to which they have comprehended a new concept (Bafille, 2005; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Teachers may find clues about students' academic difficulties and record growth of writing skills as easily as studying samples from different points in the school year (Carr, 2002; Park, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989, 1995). Journals are highly adaptable and may span any age group and any level of achievement with the right modifications (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000; Regan, 2003).

Parental Involvement

Inquiry

Families and schools have worked together since the beginning of formalized schooling, but the nature and collaboration has evolved over the years (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). To illustrate, Hill & Taylor (2004) discussed the changing roles: By the middle of the 20th century, there was strict role separation between families and schools. Schools were responsible for academic topics and families were responsible for moral, cultural, and religious education ... Families were responsible for preparing children with the necessary skills in the early years, and schools took over from there with little input from families. (p. 161)

Now, in the context of today's society, schools and families have formed partnerships to share responsibilities (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Children start school earlier than ever before. Prekindergarten programs begin for 4-year olds, but some parents utilize early intervention programs such as Head Start that begin even earlier (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Head Start, the nation's largest intervention program for at-risk children, emphasizes the importance of parental involvement, as it promotes "positive academic experiences for children and has positive effects on parents' self-development and parenting skills" (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 161).

New legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), encourages parents to become involved in their child's education. It also educates parents about how to help their children by offering a variety of handbooks online (Georgia Department of Education, 2005). Why do schools need parents? How does parental involvement effect achievement? Can parental involvement affect literacy? Why is there still a lack of parents willing to offer their time, talent or knowledge? What are barriers that can inhibit parent participation? Is the data backing parental involvement as solid as most educators assume?

Schools Need Parents

Marzano (2003) addressed the importance of parent involvement. He identified community involvement, as well as parent involvement, as one of five school-level factors affecting student achievement, and contended parent involvement is a major factor identified in research to determine if a school is an effective school.

Epstein (2004), a prominent voice in the field of parental involvement maintained, “A well-organized program of family and community partnerships yields many benefits for schools and their students” (Epstein & Salinas, 2004, ¶ 1). Research overwhelmingly supports parental involvement in schools and most parents want to be involved in their child’s schooling (Pape, 1999). Studies have long revealed the strong correlation between parental involvement and student achievement (Bafumo, 2003; Biggs, 2001; Hamner 2002; Pape, 1999; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).

Machen, Wilson, and Notar (2005) noted that parental involvement is important for pushing public school systems to higher standards: “Because of the rapid advance of the high standards, accountability, and testing movements in schools throughout the nation, there will be a need to engage families and communities as partners” (¶ 2). The National Education Association published its *Six Point Covenant* in September of 2004. The organization presented the covenant to show its support for children in public schools. The document listed parental involvement as number one, stating, “Children need devoted and interested parents” (District Administration, 2004, p. 14).

Similarly, the past 15 years’ winners of the Disney Teacher Award were surveyed. When asked what two things would most improve education in the United States, 42% answered more parental involvement. More significantly, parental involvement was rated above higher pay for teachers (23%), more resources (18%), and better testing and accountability (2%;Curriculum Review, 2005).

One defining feature of effective parental involvement is communication (Antunez, as cited in Marzano, 2003). Communication should not only be from schools to parents, but vice versa (Marzano). Yet, according to one study, the most frequent

communication used appears to be school-to-home communication in the form of newsletters, bulletins, and flyers, limiting substantial parental response (Malaragano et al., 1981, as cited in Marzano, 2003). Marzano stressed that communication does not occur automatically and “specific vehicles must be established to facilitate the flow of information to and from the school” (p. 49). Barbara Pape (1999) concurred, adding that speaking in educational jargon is one way to turn parents off to two-way communication. Parents want to know what is happening in the classroom, what is expected of their child, and how their child fits in (Pape, 1999).

It is important to note that there are numerous forms of parental involvement.

Epstein and Salinas (2004) offer the following six types of involvement:

1. **Parenting.** Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
2. **Communicating.** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home.
3. **Volunteering.** Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations.
4. **Learning at home.** Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share.
5. **Decision making.** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organizations.
6. **Collaborating with the community.** Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups. Enable all to contribute service to the community. (Epstein & Salinas, 2004, p. 8)

Pape (1999) agreed that there is an abundance of parental opportunity, stating, “In many cases, teachers can meet the needs of parents simply by sending students home with work to be completed with the parents’ help” (Pape, 1999, ¶ 4).

Conversely, Christie (2005) humorously put it this way, “There’s parent involvement and then there’s parent involvement” (p. 645). She explained that volunteering at their child’s school making things, organizing, and fund-raising are all helpful, but that there are other levels at which parents’ involvement may be more significant. Christie described Maryland’s Parent Advisory Council, in which, “Parents, families, educators, and community members work together as real partners, hold themselves mutually accountable, and have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to succeed at improving the achievement of all students” (Christie, p. 645).

Other school systems have taken the initiative to immerse parents into deeper roles within the school. Yates and Campbell (2003) reported on the efforts of Central School District of the San Bernardino County to improve their parent involvement. In 1997, volunteer coordinators, administrators, trustees, and others gathered to discuss the importance of parent involvement and challenges. Results included reading mentors who receive training from reading specialists; Math Fact Mentors who ensure tutoring for standardized tests, and Gifted and Talented mentors were added later. The school system’s Parent/Community Involvement coordinators provided and explained many opportunities for parents to become involved (Yates and Campbell).

Another system in Georgia featured the principal of George Walton Comprehensive High School in Marietta. Principal John Flatt transformed the school into an inviting environment for parents. According to Koerner (1999), more than 2000 of Walton’s parents (representing 40% of the students) are involved somehow. Though the students who attend Walton are mostly upper middle class, their busy parents kept involvement to a minimum. Flatt began by being a role model. Despite his 70-80 hour

workweeks, he worked on several parent advisory boards while his son attended the school. He convinced the “harried, ambitious, career-minded parents that they could and should make time for Walton” (Koerner, 1999, p. 73).

Parent Involvement Affects Literacy

It is well-established that parental school involvement has a positive influence on school-related outcomes for children (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Likewise, the link between supportive parental involvement and children’s early literacy is considered to be quite strong (Strickland, 2004). Snow (1999) has shown that children from homes where parents model the uses of literacy and engage children in activities that promote basic understandings about literacy and its uses are better prepared for school. The 2003 report from the National Commission on Writing advocated parental involvement with writing, suggesting parents serve as writing partners with their children, sharing their own writing with them and reviewing work as their children complete it (The Commission, 2003).

Many primary and early elementary teachers participate in projects designed to engage families in shared literacy activities. Hamner (2002) described one such project in which students take turns taking home a book bag including a stuffed toy, a book, art supplies, a topic to discuss with families, and a journal to share thoughts and ideas. Students return the materials to class and share their experience.

Parents can participate on a more routine basis with profound results. Bailey, Silvern, Brabbham, and Ross (2004) studied the effects of interactive reading homework and parent involvement on children’s literacy responses. The interactive parent homework in the study refers to homework designed to involve both parents and

children and to facilitate student reasoning for the second graders who participated.

Results indicated that interactive reading homework increased both parental involvement during the completion of reading homework assignments and students' ability to draw inferences (Bailey, Silvern, Brabham, & Ross).

Hawes and Plourde (2005) conducted a study to determine the influence of parental involvement on the reading achievement of sixth grade students. Hawes and Plourde expressed their concern of the declining reading achievement of youth. While they acknowledged the many studies regarding reading achievement and parental involvement, they pointed out that data is scarce when pinpointing middle school students. The nonexperimental, correlational study involved 57 students in East Central Washington and their parents or guardians. Using the McLeod Reading Comprehension Test, results indicated a slight positive correlation between parental involvement and reading achievement. The researchers pointed out the unique attributes and needs of middle schoolers and that these factors themselves affect the amount of parental involvement (Hawes & Plourde).

Strickland (2004) believed that parents have a vital role in children's early literacy learning. She stressed parents should realize that oral language and literacy develop together and that young children learn as they observe their adult role models make use of literacy as they go about their everyday lives (Strickland). Consequently, parents should provide a print-rich environment. Strickland confirmed, endorsing that parents should, "Provide opportunities for children to use what they know about language and literacy in order to help them transfer what they know to new situations" (Strickland, p. 87).

Examining the Lack of Parental Involvement

Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association (NEA), spoke to readers of *NEA Today*, “Ask NEA members what they want, and they’ll tell you: More parental involvement. Yes, parental involvement ranks up there with smaller class sizes and improved student discipline at the top of our members’ professional wish list” (*NEA Today*, March 2005, President’s Viewpoint section).

Although studies over the last 30 years identify a strong link between parent involvement in school and increased student achievement, enhanced self-esteem, improved behavior, and better school attendance, family involvement in U.S. schools remains minimal (Mapp, 1997). According to Goldstein (2000), parents are not as involved as they think they are. Goldstein shared results of a survey taken by Nickelodeon Channel and ‘TIME’ regarding middle school students. While 92% of the parents claim to be very interested in their children’s schoolwork, only 75% of their children said this statement was true of their parents. On the same note, 77% of parents said they actually help with homework (not just check it over) while only 60% of the kids agreed (Goldstein).

Parental school involvement is thought to decline as children move to middle and high school (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). Few parents, however, stop caring about the academic progress of their older children (Pape, 1999). One study demonstrated that although direct helping with homework declines in adolescence, parental school involvement during middle and high school is associated with an increase in the amount of time students spend on homework and with an increase in the percentage of homework completed (Epstein & Sanders).

Pape (1999) pointed out that few teacher education programs address parental involvement or how to interact with parents. She explained that most teachers give up after several attempts to make contact with parents. Pape described teachers' frustrations over scheduled parent conferences with few parents attending, "Some teachers complain that parent-teacher conferences are akin to planning for a party where less than half of those invited show up" (Pape, section entitled "Letting Parents Judge").

In a radio broadcast to parents, NEA president Reg Weaver emphasized, "If someone in your family is sick, you visit a doctor. If someone is in trouble, you consult a lawyer. And if you want your children to be successful, maybe it's time to visit their school" (NEA Today, 2005, President's Viewpoint section).

Barriers Affecting Parental Involvement

One key to positive parental involvement is building trust between parents, teachers, and schools (Bafumo, 2003; Mapp, 1997). Bafumo emphasized that parents need to be convinced that you care about their child and will provide attention to meet their child's needs. She stressed the importance of letting parents know they are welcome in your classroom (Bafumo).

Obstacles such as nonflexible work schedules, lack of child care, and transportation problems often limit parental involvement for those parents who really want to become involved but truly do not have the means to do so (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Mapp, 1997; Pape, 1999; Plevyak, 2003) Other factors serving as barriers to parental involvement include cultural, racial, and economic differences between school staff and parents (Mapp).

Parents, especially those in lower socioeconomic circumstances, are often apprehensive about making contact with teachers (Machen, 2005). “They feel they have no business talking to teachers whom they consider the education experts” (Mapp, 1997, p. 36). A study by Thurston and Navarrette (2003) reported the impact of poverty on children’s development and learning. The research involved 263 women in economically poor families. The mothers who participated in the study were nearly unanimous in their interest in their children’s education. Yet, they were not comfortable around the teachers. Poor parents are far less likely to be involved in school-based activities and less likely to meet with educators due to their sense of intimidation (Thurston & Navarrette).

Parents in lower socioeconomic families often have fewer years of education themselves and potentially carry more negative experiences with schools (Lareau, 1996). They feel ill-equipped to question the teacher or the school (Lareau; Comer, 2005). Other parents hesitate to become involved simply because they do not feel welcome (Bailey, Silvern, Brabham, & Ross, 2004; Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000; Mapp, 1997). According to Mapp, principals and teachers may claim interest in parental participation, yet grant parents only limited roles at the school and give signals that their opinions and feedback are unwelcome. Many schools are making more of an effort to connect with parents through activities and programs specifically designed to welcome families into the school. Mapp described one school in Boston where the staff created an environment and culture in which families truly felt they had joined the school community. They created a Family Outreach Program, where parent volunteers visit new families to

welcome them and answer questions. They also offered workshops and forums on educational topics (Mapp).

Some parents avoid involvement because they are unclear about what is expected of them (Powell, 1989). Uncertainty about what to do can be a deterrent to parental involvement (Hubbard, 2003; Faires, Nichols & Rickelman, 2000). But research has indicated that, when given the skills and opportunities to be involved, many parents become active participants (Powell). A study by Faires, Nichols, and Rickelman (2000) found that parental training and involvement in the teaching of selected reading lessons increased first-grade children's reading levels. Research results indicated that "unless parents receive training regarding specific procedures on how to assist their children, positive gains may not result" (Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, p. 198). However, another study researching the effects of interactive reading homework revealed that there was no significant difference between students whose parents received training and those who did not (Bailey, Silvern, Brabham, & Ross, 2004). What appeared to matter most in the latter was that the parental participation was meaningful (Bailey et al., 2004).

Strategies to Increase Parental Involvement

Many schools are making more of an effort to connect with parents through activities and programs specifically designed to welcome families into the school (Goldstein, 2000; Pape, 1999; Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005; Mapp, 1997). Many California teachers have begun making house calls to get to know parents and encourage them to become more involved in their child's school (Machen et al., 2005). In one Sacramento district, "Test scores are up, and discipline problems are down" (Goldstein,

2000). Barbara Pape (1999) also endorsed home visits as a way to build trust, as well as a way to connect with parents who have no phone. One school buses families to school meetings, feeds them, and gives door prizes (Plevyak, 2003). Another sometimes holds meetings in apartments where many students live, but do not have transportation to school (Plevyak). An elementary school sometimes holds parent conferences at McDonald's for parental convenience (Curriculum Review, 2005).

Other strategies include:

1. Make schools a welcoming environment with friendly staff (Comer, 2005; Mapp, 1997; Pape, 1999).
2. Cover all languages and respect all cultures (Pape).
3. Involve parents in the decision-making process. Provide additional support for parents such as computer instruction, communication skills, and discipline (Plevyak, 2003).
4. Promote appropriate methods of communication between parents, teachers, and schools (Plevyak; Mapp, 1997).

If all else fails, provide food, games, and prizes whenever possible, or have children sing, perform, or exhibit artwork (Curriculum Review, 2003).

Opposing Views

“Few concepts in the education debate win approval across a wider philosophical spectrum than does parent involvement. Everybody is for it,” asserted Pape (1999, p. 47). Well, not everybody. A parent in one school system went to principals in another to find

out why low-income black students were performing better than similar students in her system. The principal reported:

We don't have any expectation of the home. We don't blame the home. We can't teach parents. We don't worry whose responsibility it should be. We just consider it ours. (Matthews, 2005, p. A10).

A study conducted by EdSource (2005) of 257 California schools sought to determine which current K-5 practices are most strongly associated with higher levels of school achievement. The study was extensive and large-scale, involving researchers from Stanford University, the University of California, Berkley, and the American Institutes for Research. The survey polled about 5,500 teachers and 257 principals in 145 California school districts.

Parental involvement, among other domains such as implementing a standards program, encouraging teacher collaboration and professional development, ensuring instructional resources, enforcing high expectations for student behavior, and prioritizing student achievement were among the domains being explored. Analysis revealed four practices found to be associated with high performance included:

1. Prioritizing student achievement – These schools have teachers who report school alignment and believe the school has well defined plans for instructional improvement.
2. Implementing a coherent, Standards-Based Curriculum – These schools are more likely to have teachers report wide alignment and consistency in the curriculum, and instruction based closely on the standards.
3. Analyzing student assessment data from multiple sources – These schools report using data from a variety of student tests, including the California Standards Tests. Struggling students are identified and their academic needs addressed.
4. Ensuring instructional resources – Teachers reporting that their classrooms have adequate instructional materials and teachers' and principals' years of experience were also positively correlated to higher achievement. (Ed Source, 2005, pp. 1-2)

Soon after the results of this important study were revealed, the *Los Angeles Times* reported them and controversy ensued. Since parent involvement did not make the top four on the list, *The Los Angeles Times* gave the impression in its headline that parent involvement does not matter (EdSource, 2005). EdSource immediately put out a press release to clarify (EdSource, Press Release, 2005). In fact, parent involvement was found to be positively correlated with API achievement. However, the four strongest practices had a far greater impact on school performance (EdSource, Press Release).

Another study explored the effect that parent involvement *at school and home* can have on the academic achievement of students. Results indicated that parental involvement can lead to academic benefits, but some behaviors are more effective than others (Finn, 1998). Finn's research revealed, "Parental *engagement at home* and parental *engagement at school* are not equally important to the children's learning" (1998, p. 20). Parents of academically gifted students are informed about their youngsters' activities in school, their school performance, and whether or not they have been assigned homework. These parents also actively helped them organize their daily and weekly schedules and checked regularly to see whether they were following the routines" (Finn, p. 21). The study concluded that parental involvement at school yielded mixed results, but the involvement at home was positively correlated to successful students (Finn).

Family Message Journals: Featuring the Work of Wollman-Bonilla

What Are Family Message Journals?

Family Message Journals teach writing across the curriculum through family involvement (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Dina Carolan and Karen Wilensky, both first-grade teachers at the same school, launched these journals in their classrooms. However, little research exists today about Family Message Journals. The research that is available was conducted by teacher-researchers in their classrooms. Those studies will be addressed in the next section. Wollman-Bonilla, conducted the only formal research using Family Message Journals, combining findings from her own past research with observation of Dina's and Karen's students as they wrote throughout the school year. This section describes Wollman-Bonilla's explanation of the journals, as well as her research results from her 1996-97 study. The following information, unless otherwise noted, is referenced from *Family Message Journals: Teaching Writing Through Family Involvement* (Wollman-Bonilla).

Family Message Journals are defined as “notebooks in which children write a message to their families each day about something they did or learned or thought about in school, and a family member (or other willing adult, aside from the classroom teacher) writes a message in reply” (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 2).

How Do Family Message Journals Compare to Traditional Journals?

Family Message Journals differ from all journals mentioned earlier in several ways. Students do not select their own message topics. Typically, students do not write about facts their families already know. The goal is to inform families of something

learned that actually teaches their families or gives them other information they would not know otherwise. This point gives the Family Message Journals an authentic audience as well as an authentic purpose. Instead of writing about activities the children did the night before, or telling of upcoming weekend plans, the Family Message Journals truly share knowledge from a specific curriculum area, or “they inform families about school events and necessities, such as bringing a bag lunch for a field trip” (p. 3).

At first glance, Family Message Journals seem to be no different from dialogue journals, in which a student writes, and the teacher responds. However, with Family Message Journals, the teacher makes a point *not* to respond, but a family member, or other adult responds, providing authentic audience and purpose. These journals are unlike other learning journals, in which students write about anything they wish, or about what they learned that day. Instead, specific topics are given. Learning journals are meant primarily for *student* reflection, whereas Family Message Journals are meant to be shared.

Why Family Message Journals?

Family Message Journals (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000) combine the benefits of traditional journals with parental involvement, employing all core subjects. Like traditional journals, Family Message Journals are practical and rather simple to implement. Many journals promote reflection in some way, but Family Message Journals urge students to reflect at a higher level to explain the newly learned concept to someone who was not present. Unlike other journals:

Family Message Journals are truly examples of *children* writing to communicate. Children carry the full responsibility for the communicative value of their messages because teachers do not write in these journals at all. They are not for family-teacher communication, but for *family-child* communication. (p. 14)

The value of these messages offers what Dina calls “built-in accountability” to do their best work (p. 16). Like other journals, Family Message Journals may be less time-consuming than other, more formal writing instruction. Time is a factor for many teachers, but once they understand expectations, students will learn to write more information in less time, more accurately (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).

As The Commission on Writing reported (2003), teachers need to give students more opportunity to write, more often. As do traditional journals, Family Message Journals may be used daily, and in any subject, therefore giving students more chances to practice writing skills.

The Commission (2002) also recommended that schools use parents as partners, adding parents should model the importance of writing. Early parent involvement, as mentioned, results in long-term benefits for the student (Pape, 1999; Sattes, 1989). Unlike traditional journals, Family Message Journals involve the entire family and require a family member to respond.

How Does Parental Involvement Fit In?

Not only do Family Message Journals allow daily writing practice, it provides a real audience. When students write about school activities in which teachers and peers participated, the audience seems contrived. Writing to families provides an authentic audience with the real purpose of informing about school or persuading for something

they need. As cited by Wollman-Bonilla (2000), children realize the power of writing when there is real communicative value. The potential of the power, students learn, lies in how well their information is communicated (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Frank, 1992; Harste et al., 1984; Kreeft, 1984; Langer, 1986; Ryder et al., 1999).

Sattes (1989) found that although almost any form of parental involvement promotes student achievement, “such achievement is greater with high levels of involvement and with involvement that is meaningful” (p. 37). The 1998 U.S. Department of Education found that most parents crave information on how to support their children’s learning, but many teachers and parents struggle to connect in a meaningful way that helps improve student learning. Family Message Journals provide meaningful involvement (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).

Clearly, families are the key to the success of Family Message Journals (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Through trial and error, Dina Carolan found families respond better when in partnership with the teacher. Rather than the teacher telling parents what to do, the family-teacher relationship should flow both ways (Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Moll, 1992; Shockley et al., 1995). Carolan also learned parents felt more comfortable participating when they received a clear invitation. Family Message Journals “ask families to be crucial partners in school learning – families hold up one end of the correspondence and they *teach* through their messages” (Wollman-Bonilla, p. 21).

Carolan sends a letter to parents at the beginning of each year “explaining to families that they should write back *in response* to what the child wrote” (p. 21). She

emphasized a short note is fine, as the response is meant to be a manageable task. Though she has parents for whom English is a second language, as well as parents who write only slightly better than their children, Dina Carolan stresses it is the parents' sharing and participation that counts.

Family Message Journals in the Classroom

Variety of Genres

Graves (1983; 2003) advocated guiding children to revise writing on self-selected topics in self-selective genres. However, students most often choose narrative. Wollman-Bonilla (2000) offered, "Teachers can further challenge children and extend their writing abilities by assigning some topics for writing and by explicitly teaching them to write in wide variety of genres" (p. 15). Practice in a variety of genres better prepares students for upper-grade expectations.

Writing is not only the medium of the journals, but also the focus of instruction. Students in Dina Carolan's first-grade class learned poetry, exposition, and scientific writing. Some used lists of facts, or a song or story. Teachers taught and guided the children in structuring their messages.

Initiating

At first, some children feared failure in the task of writing messages. Carolan modeled several messages for students, encouraging them at their attempts. She realized some families may not be able to read initial attempts, but instead of offering a translation, she had the students explain what they have written to her, and then at home.

Children can at least tell their families about it, even if they can't read it word for word.

Dina wanted students to understand their writing can stand on its own.

Soon children participated in reflective discussions, during which they “share ideas for grabbing readers’ attention, as well as thoughts about what they may write. Dina’s process of demonstration and reflected discussion diminished due to children’s growing confidence and ability, and to ensure her assistance would not hinder with students’ individual thoughts and ideas. The teachers then used the journals’ full power as an instructional context, teaching audience awareness, grammar, mechanics, content, and clarity.

Message Functions

Family Message Journals teach that writing is a powerful tool for self-expression, as well as learning, thinking, and reflecting. Teachers must keep in mind thoughtful planning is imperative. “Careful planning ... can ensure that children learn a variety of purposes for writing and develop a general sense of how it can help them academically and benefit them personally to express ideas in writing (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 67).

Figure 1 illustrates one purpose for student-family communication.

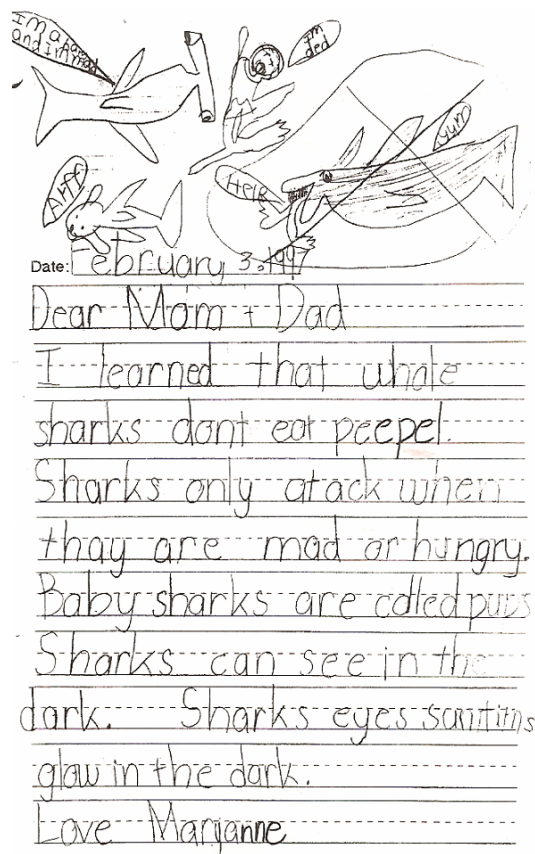


Figure 1. Midyear entry demonstrates comprehension of a science lesson. (From *Family Message Journals: Teaching writing through family involvement* by Julia Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 56. Reprinted with permission of the author.)

Families' Perspectives

Though parent involvement has a positive effect on achievement and parents express their desire and willingness, parents still find it difficult to become involved due to other commitments (Park, 2003). Family Message Journals are designed to be easily integrated to families' lives. Any family member or guardian may be the respondent, and replies may be brief.

Some families were hesitant at first, but when parents felt comfortable with the process, and they saw marked improvement in their children's writing, almost all of

parents of Dina Carolan's students reported this was an excellent strategy. Of the 20 families invited to participate, only one declined. Carolan recruited another teacher in her school for this child's "family member."

The following is an example of one parental reply. The child's message was the beginning of a story about a kite afraid of heights:

March 19, 1997

I like your story very much. I would never think to make a kite afraid of heights in my story. So good that the boy who bought the kite, pulled it back down, when he felt the wind getting too strong. It was a very safe thing to do! I hope that the kite and the boy became good friends and spent a lot of time together, having a good time!

Love,

Mommy

(Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, pp. 94-95)

Families' replies served to:

1. demonstrate interest in children's ideas and learning and ask children to tell more
2. expand children's knowledge by providing new information
3. share personal opinions and stories
4. acknowledge good ideas and vow to try them
5. ask questions to encourage thinking and problem solving
6. suggest solutions to problems
7. model a range of writing options (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 93)

Some family replies were informative, some playful. Every family did not model correct conventions, and one family was learning English, though according to Wollman-

Bonilla, neither of these situations seemed to effect the children's development as conventional writers.

Assessment

Family Message Journals document growth, and therefore a powerful assessment tool. Dina Carolan simply used an early journal message and compared it to later entries to evaluate achievement. (Carolan now uses bound composition books rather than loose-leaf notebooks, as she found that parents sometimes pulled entries they particularly liked.) The following is an entry from one student's journal from September (Figure 2), and another entry (Figure 3) written in May (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 121):

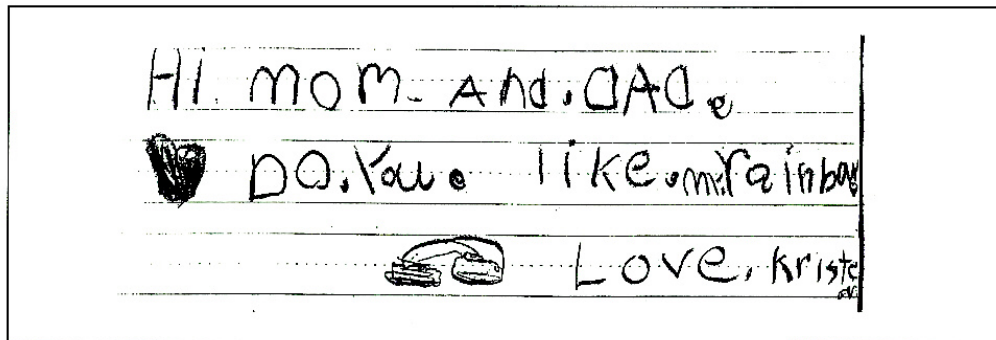


Figure 2. Student sample in September. Hi. mom. And DAD. DO. You. like. mY rainbow Love, Kristen. (From *Family Message Journals: Teaching Writing through Family Involvement* by Julie Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 121. Used with permission from the author.)

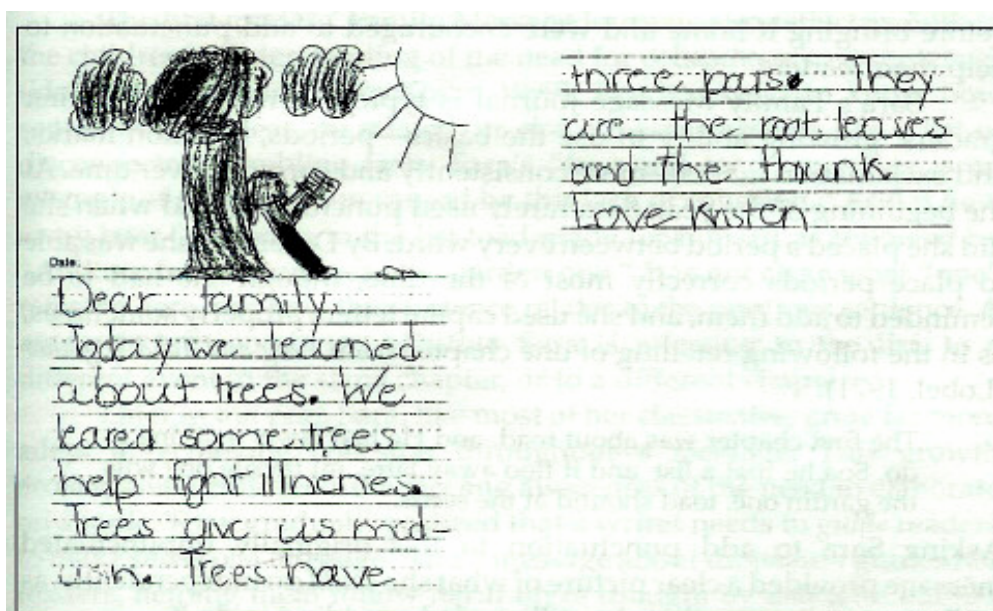


Figure 3. Same student, early May. Dear family, Today we learned about trees. We leared some trees help fight illnenes. Trees give us medcen. Trees have three pats. They are the root, leaves and the thunk. Love Kristen. (From *Family Message Journals: Teaching Writing through Family Involvement* by Julie Wollman-Bonilla, 2000. Used with permission from the author).

Dina was able to compare these two samples from the same student to see significant strides in ability to form letters, use proper spacing, and keep consistent size. Gains are apparent in content and sentence structure as well.

Dina Carolan and Wollman-Bonilla noticed significant gains made by each student in spelling, not only in product, but their processes used to figure correct spelling matured. Furthermore, since “Family Message Journals are used to record learning experiences and other activities which occur across the curriculum and the school day, teachers can use children’s messages to assess what they recall and comprehend” (2000, p.125).

Other Previous Research: Specifically on Family Message Journals

This researcher's interest in Family Message Journals was borne by serendipity. While researching for a paper two years ago, this researcher stumbled across an article by Julie Wollman-Bonilla and found it intriguing. Finding other information about this concept, however, proved daunting. The only references about Family Message Journals were cited by Wollman-Bonilla.

Two years later, this researcher found several, though not many, articles about Family Message Journals authored by others. While to the knowledge of this researcher, Wollman-Bonilla conducted the only major, formal research on these particular journals when she observed the classrooms of Dina Carolan and Karen Wilensky, first grade teachers. Her research was conducted in the school year 1996-1997 and her book, *Family Message Journals: Teaching Writing Through Family Involvement*, was published in 2000. Since then, there have been two small, informal studies done by teacher-researchers. The first study was conducted by Horton (2004) and the second by two teachers at Corl Street Elementary School (2004).

Janeen Horton

Horton's (2004) study is reported in Moore's *Classroom Research for Teachers: A Practical Guide* (2004). Horton conducted her very informal research with kindergartners in 2002 as a classroom action research inquiry. The slight information offered by Moore left this researcher hungry for more details. Nevertheless, Moore reports, "Janeen confirmed her beliefs that authentic reading and writing with a purpose is the most developmentally appropriate way to teach literacy" (p. 74).

Canfield Inquiry Projects of 2004

Another study, a bit more formal, was conducted by two teachers, Cheryl and Erin, her intern, (no last names were provided) at a small elementary school in Pennsylvania in 2004. The participants included a first and second grade split classroom. This study originated when Corl Street Elementary's principal asked Cheryl to attend a teacher inquiry conference. Cheryl decided to use Family Message Journals for her Canfield Inquiry Project after reading Wollman-Bonilla's book (2000). Cheryl noticed an apparent change in her reluctant writers' attitudes as they wrote in their Family Message Journals. Cheryl chose 7 students, each at a different writing stage, on which to focus.

To analyze data gathered through the journals, she chose, "a typical entry for each child from the beginning, middle, and end of the school year to highlight the skills they had made progress in" (Canfield Inquiry Projects, 2004, p. 8). To determine her students' and parents' attitudes about the journals, Cheryl conducted interviews with her seven chosen students and their parents. She used her school district's *Language Arts Continuum: Writing* to assess growth. Cheryl's data analysis yielded that writing to parents:

1. made writing a meaningful activity for her students,
2. led to more confidence in writing,
3. gave some choice within the daily writing topics,
4. allowed students to express their feelings in the Family Message Journals.(Canfield Inquiry Projects, 2004)

All three studies, Wollman-Bonilla (2000), Horton (2004), and Cheryl with her Canfield Inquiry Project (2004) produced similar results. The participants in these studies ranged from kindergartners through second grade. This study, however, examined the effectiveness of Family Message Journals as a strategy for teaching writing with third graders. This researcher examined data through the journals, seeking any new themes through writing instruction in combination with parental participation with these older students.

Justification for Research Methodology

Horton (as cited in Moore, 2004) studied second semester kindergartners in her experience with Family Message Journals, and details of her research methodology were not explicitly provided. However, Moore alluded that Horton analyzed the difference between early and later journal entries of her students to determine growth and progress.

The other two studies, though different in scope, applied very similar methodology. Both chose qualitative case studies. Wollman-Bonilla (2000) chose 4 students for her case study, while Cheryl (Canfield Inquiry Projects, 2004) chose 7. Both looked at early, middle, and late entries to compare growth. Both studies utilized field notes and interviews with students and their parents for data triangulation.

One significant difference among the three studies highlighted concerned the role of the researcher. Both Horton (as cited in Moore, 2004) and Cheryl (Canfield Inquiry Project, 2004) were teacher researchers. They were daily active participants, teaching their students as they gathered data, listening to the students interact with each other, and observing students as they wrote their entries and read parent responses. Wollman-

Bonilla (2000), however, was a participant observer. She visited the two first grade classrooms once a week from early October until late May to observe the students as they worked in their journals. The two first grade teachers continued to teach as normal, gathering data through the journals daily.

Another similar study mentioned in the “Writing” section was conducted utilizing Writer’s Workshop (Martin et al., 2005). The methodology used by these researchers was similar to those above. Participants were first graders engaging in the writing process. This qualitative case study focused on three students of varying abilities. Similar to the other studies, writing samples were gathered twice in Fall and twice in Spring for analysis of growth. As in the other studies, students and teachers were interviewed (Martin et al., 2005).

This doctoral study, as described in section 1, explored the effectiveness of Family Message Journals as a writing strategy. This researcher’s methodology was appropriate for this qualitative case study, as it closely paralleled that of the four studies profiled above. The researcher will serve as an active participant, as did Horton (as cited in Moore, 2004) and Cheryl (Canfield Inquiry Projects, 2004). The researcher analyzed the journals as artifacts to document growth by gathering writing samples at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. The researcher’s reflections and observations from her Reflective Journal, as well as interviews with students and their parents, were triangulated to strengthen the validity of the data, as did the studies described above (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000; Moore; Canfield Inquiry Projects).

Summary of Review

Writing was one of the three “original Rs” that was nudged out, almost undetected. Now writing has been labeled the “Silent R” and the “Neglected R” (Nagin, 2006; The Commission, 2003). Nagin urged us not to panic – just yet. Nagin explained that there are successful programs out there, but they are, for some reason, not yet making it to the general public. Nagin calmed the reader, explaining, “Today, the need to improve writing is perhaps better framed as a challenge rather than a crisis (Nagin, p. 2).

Before there are long-term consequences, teachers must find time to return writing to its proper place in the curriculum. Time is scarce in today’s school day. After the bathroom break, snack time, recess, and assemblies, teachers end up with only half of the school day to teach a whole day’s lessons. Family Message Journals may be one strategy that can help writing instruction slip into the lesson plans once again.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on the research procedures followed in this qualitative case study. A brief review of the problem, purpose, and research questions are followed by detailed description of methodology, including participants, materials used, and data collection. Next, the researcher provides a description of the data analysis methods and procedure for data analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with an explanation of data organization and triangulation.

Review of Problem

Writing is one major casualty of the growing curricula facing teachers (National Commission on Writing, 2003). In *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution* (The Commission), the Commission reports that writing has not been given the full attention it deserves since the release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) twenty years ago and now must become a central focus of the school agenda (College Board – Press Release, 2003).

At the same time, schools need parents more than ever before (Marzano, 2003). Although studies over the last thirty years identified a strong link between parent involvement in school and increased student achievement, enhanced self-esteem, improved behavior, and better school attendance, family involvement in U.S. schools remains minimal (Comer, 2005; Corday & Wildon, 2004; Mapp, 1997). In addition, writing skills are declining, teachers are finding little or no time to include writing instruction, and parental involvement remains weak (National Writing Commission,

2003). Family Message Journals may be a strategy to address these dilemmas. The problem is there is little research combining the two strategies of journal writing with parental involvement. Wollman-Bonilla (2000) conducted the first formal, published research on these particular journals.

A few small studies have since surfaced (Horton, as cited in Moore, 2004; Canfield Inquiry Projects, 2004). However, most data has been gathered from kindergarten, first, or second grade students. As a result, there is a need for further research to explore how journals can be used as an effective strategy for teaching writing across the curriculum while utilizing parental participation. More specifically, there is little information on using Family Message Journals with older students.

Review of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how Family Message Journals, with parent participation, can impact students' writing ability. There is little research combining these two powerful strategies. This study sought to contribute to the existing information and to expand upon ways to use Family Message Journals to improve writing skills in third grade students.

Review of Research Questions

The central question to be explored in this study was: How can writing instruction through Family Message Journals impact third grade students' writing ability?

The study will also seek to answer the following subsidiary questions:

1. What is the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum?

2. What is the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals as a tool for improving written communication skills in elementary school students?
3. What is the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education?

Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

The basic premise of this study was to combine adequate time allotted for writing instruction across the curriculum, journal writing, and parental involvement. The combination of these three tools makes up the concept of Family Message Journals. The researcher chose to conduct a qualitative study because a rich, descriptive narrative would provide a better means of exploring the impact of Family Message Journals than reporting quantitative test scores. The researcher chose to conduct open-ended unstructured interviews to better understand the experience of the students and parents than would be rendered from a quantitative survey. According to Creswell (1998):

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

The researcher's choice of qualitative research meets the criteria in Creswell's definition. Additionally, the researcher agrees with Creswell's opinion about qualitative study: "Employ a qualitative approach to emphasize the researcher's role as *active learner*, who can tell the story from the participants' view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (Creswell, 1998, p. 18).

Within qualitative research, the researcher chose to conduct a case study. Mirriam (2002) described a case study as an “intense description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community. The case is a bounded, integrated system” (p. 8). Similarly, Creswell (1998) agreed that a case study is “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ of a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61).

This case study design was chosen, as the “case” was identified as the teacher researcher’s classroom and its use of Family Message Journals as a tool for writing instruction. The case was bounded by time, as the researcher will study journal entries written in a 4-month time period. It is also bound by place, in a single classroom. Extensive, multiple sources of information were used in data collection to provide a detailed, in-depth picture of the effectiveness of the strategy, as characteristic of a typical case study. These sources of information included studying background information of the case study students, studying the journals as artifacts, conducting interviews with both student participants and their parents, and utilizing notes from a Reflective Journal kept by the researcher.

This qualitative case study derived logically from the problem presented. The problem was there was not enough research on Family Message Journals utilized by older students. The rich description that naturally evolved through qualitative design was appropriate for exploring the journals. The case study allowed the researcher to focus in-depth on a few students to discover a wealth of information, rather than on many students, yielding less data. The choice of qualitative case study adhered to the scope of

social change, as well. The information uncovered about the affect of Family Message Journals will afford teachers the ability to adapt even the tightest of schedules to accommodate writing in the curriculum. Providing students with more time to write leads to more quality writing (Graves, 2003).

Validity

Creswell (1998) advocated using the term *verification* rather than *validity* “because verification underscores qualitative research as a distinct approach, a legitimate mode of inquiry in its own right” (p. 201). In a later edition Creswell (2003) offered a list of strategies to promote verification. The strategies this researcher plans to use from Creswell’s list include triangulation, member checking, bias clarification, and peer-debriefing.

The researcher in this study triangulated data from Family Message Journals studied as artifacts, student background information from cumulative folders, information from Parents’ Homework, interviews of parents and students, and information from the researcher’s Reflective Journal. Member checking was done by a parent of one of the 6 case study students. This parent read the final report to determine if specific themes or descriptions were accurate. Bias clarification were reduced by utilizing the researcher’s Reflective Journal. “This self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers” (Cresswell, 2003, p. 196). Peer debriefing enhanced the accuracy of the account. The researcher asked two fellow Walden students, familiar with research techniques, “to review and ask questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher” (Creswell, p. 196). The researcher took into account the suggestions of the

peer debriefing and member checking to enhance the validity, or verification of the study.

Participants

Population

The researcher's place of employment is an elementary school in a rural setting in west central Georgia. The school is one of only four elementary schools for the entire county. The participants of the study were taken from the convenience sample of the researcher's entire third-grade class, which consisted of 15 students.

During preplanning, students were assigned to classes by the principal, with assistance from the secretary. At the end of the 2006-2007 school year, the second-grade teachers provided the principal with a card for each rising third-grader. The cards were color-coded pink for girls and blue for boys. Each card contained the student's name, approximate ability level, and any special notations the second-grade teachers deemed important for the next school year (such as suggestions for separating certain students from each other, third-grade teacher recommendations, special education referrals). The principal separated the third-grade population's cards into stacks of male and female. He then separated both stacks into piles of ability levels, informally estimated by second-grade teachers at the end of the last school year.

After all rising third-grade students were separated by gender and ability level, the principal randomly assigned students, taking care to assign each of the 6 third-grade teachers an equal number of students within each stack. Consequently, the researcher's class consisted of heterogeneously grouped students.

Sampling

Sampling in this study was done by convenience. Although the researcher's entire third-grade class participated in Family Message Journals, 6 students were chosen for the case study. The students were not necessarily chosen to give the sample a variety of academic ability, but instead for what the student may be able to contribute to the study.

Rationale for Sample Size

Wollman-Bonilla (2000) decided upon 4 first-graders for her case study, explaining that the 4 chosen students represented the various abilities of the class. This researcher contemplated duplicating this reasoning, as a small sampling of 4 students would allow the researcher to study the journals of these students in more detail. However, this researcher decided to utilize 6 students for the case study. The 6 students chosen by this researcher still represented the various range of ability levels in the classroom, but the slightly larger number will allow the researcher more opportunity to gather data to support the research. At the same time, the sample size of 6 students is still small enough to allow the researcher to delve more deeply to study the details of the journals. A larger sample size would not afford the same opportunity.

Ethics

Each student in the researcher's class and at least one parent were given a thorough, face-to-face explanation of the study and were given an opportunity to ask questions. Consent forms were signed and received from each case study student (see Appendix C) and at least one parent of the case study student (see Appendix D). Confidentiality forms (see Appendix E) were signed by the principal and the researcher's five third-grade colleagues. A confidentiality agreement was also signed by

a fellow Walden University peer. Given her knowledge of the research process, this colleague acted as peer reviewer for this study. Participants were told that their information would remain confidential and that they were invited to view the completed results before submission to check their personal responses for accuracy. IRB approval was granted before research began (#01-28-08-0310455, see p. 293).

A researcher-participant relationship was formed by simply establishing the teacher-student relationship. The teacher and students participated in various activities during the first week of school that facilitated “team-building.”

Materials and Instrumentation

Each student was provided a composition book for the journal. The teacher/researcher’s instruction followed the third-grade curriculum under the Georgia Performance Standards. Writing in Family Message Journals approximately four days per week, the entries were used to document students’ growth in writing ability including (but not limited to) handwriting, mechanics, usage and expression, and content. The students’ Family Message Journals served as the primary artifacts. The principle instrument for this qualitative case study became the Family Message Journals. The data was generated from the students’ daily journal entries and the parent responses the students received. This data from the journals were triangulated with one-on-one, unstructured open-ended interviews of both the case study parents and students. The interviews were conducted at the end of the study period (see Interview Guides, Appendixes F and G). Other data triangulated included Parents’ Homework (see Appendix H), student background information, and the Researcher’s Reflective Journal.

Data Collection Procedures

Creswell (1998) explained that qualitative researchers are the instruments for collecting data in a natural setting, “attempting to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 15). Qualitative data, as defined by Hatch (2002) consists of “objects, pictures, or detailed descriptions that cannot be reduced to numbers without distorting the essence of the social meanings they represent” (p. 9).

For this study, data will be generated from journal entries written by the students in a four-month period. The journals themselves were artifacts and collected as unobtrusive data. The data from the journals were triangulated with data from unstructured, open-ended interviews with the 6 case study students and at least one family member for each student. Data from the parent and student interviews were organized in a data source matrix created for this study.

Once parental consent and student assent forms were signed and collected from each case study participant, background information was gathered for both students and parents. As part of the regular “Back to School” and “Get to Know Me” activities that are a tradition during the first week of school, the researcher sent home *Parents’ Homework*. This handout asks questions regarding the background of both parents such as, hobbies, places of employment, and travel experiences. There are also questions about their child, such as strengths, weaknesses, siblings, and expectations for the upcoming school year. Additional background information was gathered informally during the second parent conference in February 2008, just before progress reports. Background information about the students was gathered from cumulative folders. Data from these folders included scores, grades, and any special education history from as

early as pre-kindergarten. Any gaps or questions about background information on the case study students were answered by the parents in the parent interview.

During the investigation of 4 months of journal entry artifacts, the researcher placed the primary emphasis of data collection on the 6 case study students. Data collection regarding the entire class was secondary. This type of data collection added depth and contributed to the study as a whole. The researcher observed the activities and listened to comments and conversations during the whole-class observations, and recorded these anecdotal incidences in a reflective journal. This data was important to formulate “the big picture” which illustrated the affect Family Message Journals had on the students.

Family Message Journals

Journals were first introduced in class during the third week of school. Purposely, the teacher/researcher did not provide all of the details. Giving the students bits and pieces of information about the upcoming journal project at this early stage served to pique the students’ interest. Soon after, a detailed parent letter went home, which served as an introduction of the journals. It included a sample student entry and a sample parent response (see Appendix I). Details of the Family Message Journals, explanation of the study, and consent/assent forms were explained to parents in the regularly scheduled parent conference during the fourth week of school. However, consent/assent forms were not sent home to parents and students until IRB approval of the form’s prototype.

The students’ first official introduction to Family Message Journals was just after the parent conferences, by way of a teacher demonstration. Students wrote in Family Message Journals about four times per week during a 4-month period. Entries varied in

genre and topics were cross-curricular. The journal topic was given by the teacher/researcher daily, and was always about something the students learned about or thought about in school that day. The topic was usually chosen in advance and in the teacher's lesson plans, but often modified to enhance teachable moments. Sometimes, the teacher would ask the students for topic ideas. (Sporadically, students were given "free days" when they could choose their own topic.) After being given the topic, students were free to write what they wanted regarding that topic in the journals. The teacher/researcher assisted the children when asked a direct question, but assistance came in the form of encouragement and brainstorming ways to find answers rather than the teacher/researcher supplying the answers.

After the 4-month writing period, journal entries by the 6 case study students and their parent responses were scanned into computer files. Scanned journals were read, re-read and coded, for ongoing analysis. Data from the journals were used to:

1. explore the affect Family Message Journals had on third-grade students' writing ability.
2. determine the affect of using the journals for writing across the curriculum.
3. explore the affect of Family Message Journals on students' written communication skills.
4. determine the affect the journals had for meaningfully involving their parents in their children's education.

It is important to note that students were concurrently learning the fundamental grammar skills during language arts. The language arts instruction followed the text,

which was assigned to the entire third grade (Harcourt, 2002). This text begins with a review of basic simple sentence structure, followed by chapters featuring the eight basic parts of speech. Between each chapter covering the parts of speech, there is a writing section with a lesson followed by practice exercises. The students were taught these grammar lessons during language arts. However, most writing in the classroom revolved around Family Message Journals. Family Message Journals were used as the primary tool for applying writing instruction. It was during journal time that students learned about different genres, the importance of audience, practiced written communication skills, and reflected upon content-area learning.

Interviews

Interviews with 6 case study students and at least one member of each case study parent were conducted separately, after school toward the end of the study. All parents participated in the interviews with the exception of Shaun's mother. Each interview was immediately transcribed and double checked for accuracy. Interviews were read, reread, and later coded. Data gathered from the student and parent interviews were utilized to determine student and parent opinions regarding the impact of Family Message Journals on writing ability, writing across the curriculum, written communication skills, and parent involvement.

Researcher's Reflective Journal

Throughout the process of this study, a Researcher's Reflective Journal was kept to record the thoughts, opinions, fears, successes, failures, confusion, and surprises throughout the doctoral study process. Excerpts of this journal are included where relevant to give the reader insight into the reflections of the researcher.

Reflective journals are becoming more widely accepted as a qualitative research tool (Stake, 1995). According to Uline et al. (2004), teachers can use feedback through reflective journals to understand the effectiveness of theory-and-practice curriculum. Hubbs and Brand (2005) described the reflective journal as a paper mirror, and explained, “The reflective journal provides a vehicle for inner dialogue that connects thoughts, feelings, and actions. Journaling may provide a medium for the student to access the affective-volitional tendency, and so prompts thought and action” (p. 62).

Background Information and Parents’ Homework

Background information was garnered from student cumulative records. The Parents’ Homework, routinely sent to parents during the first week of school, offered information about student strengths and weaknesses according to the parents. Both of these sources were available for extraneous information and were used to illuminate any factors that may have any influence on the student, academic or otherwise. Information from cumulative folders and Parents’ Homework were triangulated with data from the Family Message Journals and interviews, as well.

Role of Researcher

The researcher is a full-time third-grade teacher, and as such, was an active participant observer. Many researchers have expressed their negative opinions regarding teachers in the role of active participant observers (Hatch, 2002; Janesick, 2004; Mills, 2003). Hatch had mixed feelings (both negative and positive) about being a participant observer:

While I sometimes capitulate, my general stance is to discourage students from studying their own contexts. This applies especially to teachers studying their own classrooms ... It is just too difficult for educators to pull back from their insider

perspectives and see things with the eyes of a researcher and educator when the enactment of both roles is required in the same setting. (p. 47)

The more involved the observer is as a participant in the setting, the closer he or she is to the action. Not only does acting as a participant allow access to places where the action happens, but it places the researcher in a position to experience feelings similar to those they are studying ... it would give the researcher a richer perspective. (p. 75)

This researcher's decision to be an active participant was made by necessity. The researcher's rural school system lacks funding for teachers to be absent from their classrooms for the length of time necessary to gather qualitative data from another teacher's classroom. Similarly, it was not feasible for the researcher to be observed by an outside observer for the length of time necessary to gather qualitative data.

Data Analysis – Findings

Characteristics of Qualitative Data Analysis

Stake (1995) placed a disclaimer upon his limitations as a qualitative case study researcher. He believed that regarding data analysis, qualitative and quantitative techniques could not be less alike, using “analysis and synthesis in direct interpretation” (p. 75). His goal is described as follows:

In my analysis, I do not seek to describe the world or even to describe fully the case. I seek to make sense of certain observations of the case by watching as closely as I can and by thinking about it as deeply as I can. It is greatly subjective. I defend it because I know no better way to make sense of the complexities of my own case. (Stake, 1995, p. 76-77)

Method and Rationale of Analysis

Hatch (2002) described qualitative data analysis as, “a systematic search for meaning. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generates theories” (p. 148). For this qualitative case study, inductive analysis was used. According to Mills (2002), “Inductive data analysis is a search for patterns of meaning and data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made” (p. 99). Inductive analysis was appropriate for this case study because the researcher began with a mass of qualitative data generated from multiple sources, and then read, reread, categorized, and coded all data until raw data were transformed into meaningful themes.

Codes derived from the Georgia Writing Assessment Rubric (see Appendix B) were used to analyze writing domains and their elements. Permission was sought from researcher Julie Wollman-Bonilla to possibly use her coding system or an adaptation of it. Permission was granted in the form of an email (see Appendix J).

Procedure for Data Analysis

This qualitative case study explored the impact of Family Message Journals on third-grade students’ writing ability. The researcher was also interested in exploring Family Message Journals as a tool to teach writing across the curriculum, as a tool for improving written communication skills, and as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child’s education.

Creswell (1998) asserted that for a case study, analysis consists of making a detailed description of the case and its setting. To analyze the data, Creswell advocated

“analyzing multiple sources of data to determine evidence for each step or phase in the evolution of the case” (p. 153). The sources of data used and analyzed for this study included the following:

1. Background information on students
2. Family Message Journals with student entries as primary artifacts
3. Parent responses to children’s entries
4. Parent interviews
5. Student interviews
6. Researcher’s Reflective Journal

The volume of data from multiple sources was overwhelming at times. A method for organization was imperative (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Mills, 2003). For this qualitative case study, Creswell’s (2003) six-step process was used to make meaning of the various data collected. The steps were as follows:

1. Organize and prepare data for analysis. This involves transcribing interviews, scanning material, typing field notes, and sorting and arranging different types of data, depending on the source.
2. Read through all data. Obtain a general sense of the information and reflect on its overall meaning.
3. Begin detailed analysis with coding. It involves taking text data or images into categories and labeling those categories.
4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis. This analysis is useful in designing detailed descriptions for case studies and narrative research projects. Then, use the coding to generate a small number of themes or categories.
5. Advance how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative. The most popular approach is to use a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis.
6. A final step in data analysis involves making an interpretation or meaning of the data. (Creswell, 2003, p. 193-194)

Analysis of Family Message Journals

Family Message Journals are defined, according to Wollman-Bonilla (2000), as “notebooks in which children write a message to their families each day about something they did or learned or thought about in school, and a family member (or other willing adult, aside from the classroom teacher) writes a message in reply” (p. 2).

Students wrote in Family Message Journals about four times per week (Monday through Thursday) during a four-month period. As stated, entries varied in genre and topics were cross-curricular. The topic was given by the teacher/researcher daily, but within that topic, students were free to write content of their choice. Each evening, a member of the students’ family responded to the students’ entry. Family responses were read aloud the next day.

Student entries. To prepare the Family Message Journal student entries, one entry for each week of the 16 weeks of data collection was chosen to be analyzed. Entries were chosen to portray the average writing ability and to provide a variety of genre to be studied. Each of these entries was photocopied, as well as typed into Microsoft Word 2007 exactly as written by the student. Each photocopied entry was analyzed and coded (see Appendix B) according to codes derived from the Georgia Writing Assessment Rubric’s four domains (see Appendix A) :

1. Domain 1: Conventions
2. Domain 2: Ideas
3. Domain 3: Organization
4. Domain 4: Style

The word processed entries were analyzed for word count, number of sentences, number of words per sentence, number of characters per word, and grade equivalent. This data from the word-processed entries were analyzed to determine the percentage of Conventions errors in each entry.

Student entries were also coded by academic subject being addressed:

1. Math
2. Science
3. Reading
4. Language
5. Social Studies
6. Other

These codes and the data they produced were used to explore the affect of using Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum.

Parent Responses

Parent responses of the 6 case study parents were scanned as well. These parent responses were coded in order to explore the impact of using Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education (see Appendix K). Responses were coded according to the nature of the message to explore emerging themes: The themes discovered will be discussed in detail in the Results section of chapter 4.

Analysis of Student and Parent Interviews

Each of the 6 case study students and at least one parent were interviewed separately at the end of the data collection period (see Interview Guides, Appendixes A

and B). The open-ended interviews sought the opinions of the participants about the Family Message Journal experience. Specifically, student and parent opinions focused on writing ability, writing across the curriculum, written communication skills, and parent involvement. Interview responses were transcribed immediately and coded according to the research question answered. Data from all interviews were triangulated with data from the student and parent entries. Table 1 illustrates research questions answered by student interviews; Table 2 illustrates the same for parent interviews.

Table 1

Student Interview Matrix

Interview Question	Central Question	Subsidiary Question 1	Subsidiary Question 2	Subsidiary Question 3	Affective
1	x				
2	x				
3	x				
4		x			
5			x		
6			x		
7					x
8				x	
9				x	
10					x
11					x
12					x

Table 2

Parent Interview Matrix					
Interview Question	Central Question	Subsidiary Question 1	Subsidiary Question 2	Subsidiary Question 3	Affective
1		x			
2	x		x		
3	x		x		
4	x		x		
5				x	
6				x	
7				x	
8					x

Analysis of Researcher's Reflective Journal

A reflective journal was kept to record anecdotal incidents during the Family Message Journal study. Entries often included frustrations and successes throughout the study, as well as quotes made by students and parents during the Family Message Journal project. These entries were coded according to the research question being explored and included where relevant. Data garnered from the Researcher's Reflective Journal were also triangulated along with other data to add depth to the study.

Analysis of Background Information and Parents' Homework

Background information was gathered from student cumulative records. The Parents' Homework, routinely sent to parents during the first week of school, offered information about student strengths and weaknesses according to the parents. Both of these sources were available for extraneous information and were used to illuminate any

factors that may have any influence on the student, academic or otherwise. Information from cumulative folders and Parents' Homework were triangulated with data from the Family Message Journals and interviews, as well.

Data Organization and Triangulation

The sheer volume of data from multiple sources was overwhelming at times. A method for organization was imperative (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Mills, 2003). For this qualitative case study, Creswell's six-step process was used to make meaning of the various data collected. The steps were as follows:

1. Organize and prepare data for analysis. This involves transcribing interviews, scanning material, typing field notes, and sorting and arranging different types of data, depending on the source.
2. Read through all data. Obtain a general sense of the information and reflect on its overall meaning.
3. Begin detailed analysis with coding. It involves taking text data or images into categories and labeling those categories.
4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis. This analysis is useful in designing detailed descriptions for case studies and narrative research projects. Then, use the coding to generate a small number of themes or categories.
5. Advance how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative. The most popular approach is to use a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis.
6. A final step in data analysis involves making an interpretation or meaning of the data. (Creswell, 2003, p. 193-194)

As well as following Creswell's suggestions, the researcher used Microsoft Excel 2007 for organizing coded data. Using this software, a data source matrix was created. Data was entered into the matrix and triangulated. According to Mills (2003), a triangulation matrix is "a simple grid that shows the various data sources that will be used to answer each research question" (p. 52). Data gathered from Family Message Journal entries were triangulated with data from student and parent interviews, as well as

data garnered from background information and any information from the researcher's Reflective Journal. This information is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Data Source Matrix					
Data Source	Central Question	Subsidiary Question 1	Subsidiary Question 2	Subsidiary Question 3	Affective
FMJ Student Entries	x	x	x		x
FMJ Parent Responses	x	x	x	x	x
Student Interviews	x	x	x	x	x
Parent Interviews	x	x	x	x	x
Parents' Homework				x	x
Reflective Journal			x	x	x

Summary

This chapter explained the research procedures followed in this qualitative case study. The study sought to answer the following central question: Can writing instruction using Family Message Journals improve third grade students' writing ability?

The study will also seek to answer the following subsidiary questions:

1. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum?
2. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals as a tool for improving written communication skills in elementary school students?

3. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education?

The choice to use a qualitative case study was derived logically from the problem presented. The rich description that naturally evolved through the qualitative design was appropriate for exploring the affect of Family Message Journals. Choosing case study allowed the researcher to focus on a few students to gather in-depth data, which would have not been possible with a large sample. Participants included the researcher's entire third-grade class of students, but the case study placed emphasis on 6 students. Students and parents were briefed on the nature of the study before signing consent forms.

The teacher/researcher acted as an active participant observer. Materials were very simple for this study. Each student was given a composition book for his or her Family Message Journal. Data was collected through a variety of sources: student background information, Family Message Journals with student entries and parent responses, parent and student interviews of the case study families, as well as information from the researcher's Reflective Journal.

Students' writing instruction revolved around the Family Message Journals, in which they wrote approximately 4 days per week. Topics were always about some topic learned in school that day. Parents responded each evening, and responses were read aloud the next day. Data from all sources were coded, organized, and triangulated into a Data Source Matrix with assistance from Microsoft Excel 2007.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

Chapter Overview

This chapter will focus on a review of the purpose of the study and the research questions. A description of the school, setting, teacher, curriculum, and the teacher/researcher's class will follow. A detailed description of the background and birth of Family Message Journals will help to acclimate the reader to the setting of the study. The 6 case study students will then be profiled in detail, followed by an extensive narrative to define the results of each research question. Finally, the researcher will provide an explanation of limitations and verification of the results.

Explanation of First Person Point of View

A portion of this chapter will reflect the first person point of view, as supported by several researchers. Creswell (2003) suggested "using the first person *I* or the collective *we* in the narrative form" (p. 197). He demonstrated the successful use of this first person voice in his sample narrative (Example 10.1, p. 198-205). In their *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin & Lincoln (2005) cited Mutua & Swadener (2004, p. 16) regarding personal voice within qualitative research, "Experimental, reflexive ways of writing first-person ethnographic texts are now commonplace" (p. x). Finally, Stake, considered to be one of the most prominent experts in the case study research (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) advocated using first person if and when the case calls for it:

Factual Versus Interpretive and Reflective

Data collection and analysis will be intertwined with researcher interpretation when appropriate. In *Dissertation Journey*, Roberts (2004) provided a checklist for data analysis. One item on the checklist read, “Is this section free of interpretation? (Note: In historical, case study, or ethnographic studies, factual and interpretive material is sometimes interwoven to sustain interest)” (p. 214).

Furthermore, Stake (1995) acknowledged that qualitative and quantitative research varies greatly in terms of reporting data. Unlike their quantitative counterparts:

We use ordinary language and narratives to describe the case. We seek to portray the case comprehensively, using ample but nontechnical description and narrative. The report may read something like a story. Our observations cannot help but be interpretive, and our descriptive report is laced with and followed by interpretation. We offer opportunity for readers to make their own interpretations of the case, but we offer ours, too. (p. 134)

Thus, this chapter of Results and Analysis of Data will contain factual information, but the researcher’s interpretation, that is, my reflection, will be woven into the narrative, as well.

Review of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore if Family Message Journals, with parent participation, can improve students’ writing ability. There is little research combining these two powerful strategies. This study sought to contribute to the existing information and to expand upon ways to utilize Family Message Journals to improve writing skills in third-grade students.

Review of Research Questions

The central question to be explored in this study was: Can writing instruction using Family Message Journals improve third-grade students' writing ability?

The study will also seek to answer the following subsidiary questions:

1. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum?
2. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals as a tool for improving written communication skills in third grade students?
3. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education?

The Setting, the Demographics, and the Players

All demographic data were taken from school and county records and were current as of August 24, 2007.

The School

The county in which this study took place is located in a rural area of west-central Georgia. The researcher's school is one of the four elementary schools. There are 578 students enrolled, of which 92 of them are third-graders. Of these 92 third-graders, 82% are White, 11% are Black, .04% are Mixed, and .02% are Hispanic. School records show 27% of the students as qualified for free or reduced lunch. Of the 578 students, 40 receive special services for Speech Language Pathology, and 17 receive services for Special Education. The school's standardized test scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) are either in line with the

state's average or above in all areas tested. Of all of the four schools in the county, the researcher's school has one of the most favorable socioeconomic populations. Most students are from middle class families.

The Curriculum

The third-grade curriculum for the state of Georgia is followed in the researcher's classroom. Students also take part in "specials," which include art, music, physical education, and computers. Students attend specials once a week for 45 minutes.

The Teacher

The teacher researcher is in her 17th year of teaching. The first 11 were spent teaching middle school on a military post in west-central Georgia. After two years at home, she began teaching third grade, and has continued in third grade for the past seven years. She currently holds a bachelor's of science degree in education, a master's of science in education, and a specialist's degree in education. She is married with six children.

The Class

All children's names throughout the study are pseudonyms. The researcher's class consists of 15 students, all 8 or 9 years old. The school's population consists of 45% female and 54% male. In contrast, there are 11 boys and 4 girls in the researcher's class. This ratio makes classroom management challenging at times. The class has 31% on free or reduced lunch, which is comparable to the school's 27%. Of the 15 students, 11 are White and 4 are Black. No students attend special services. One boy is being evaluated for Speech, and one girl is being tested for a learning disability in written language.

The entire class participated in Family Message Journals. However, for the purposes of this Doctoral Study, emphasis will be placed on the 6 case study students. There will be periodic references to members of the rest of the class when relevant to the case study.

The Case Study Students

Six participants of the class of 15 were selected. Each student is identified by a pseudonym. The parents of these students then became participants as well. Their names have also been changed. The 6 students were chosen to represent a variety of academic ability levels in the classroom. The range of ability levels was determined by last year's standardized test scores combined with this year's classroom performance. For my sample, I wanted to mirror a similar ratio of gender and ethnicity. Therefore, the sample consisted of one girl and five boys. Five of the students are White, and one is Black. Both of these ratios are consistent with the ratio of the class. Each of these students will be introduced within the data analysis.

Background: Birth of Family Message Journals – Whole Class

Prologue

Family Message Journals began with great anticipation. Journals had purposely been left on an open shelf to catch the attention of the students. Some asked what the journals were for. Some rifled through them, checking out the different colors and designs of the covers. All were curious. The mystery surrounding the journals added to the suspense of our new project, and by the time Family Message Journals began, the students were already excited at the prospect of “something” exciting.

I began by giving general instructions. I discussed the purpose of the journal, when students were going to write, what they would write, and where to keep them.

I explained that there were several purposes of the journal. The first was to be able to practice writing on a more regular basis, to follow their progress as their writing improves, to summarize what they learned that day, and to write notes to their parents. I told the students that they would usually write in journals Monday through Thursday of each week. Each day, they will read the response from their parents on the topic the day before, and then write a new entry as well. What they write, I continued, depended upon what we were studying in class that day. I discussed the importance of keeping up with the journals, and that it is their responsibility to do so. I suggested, “Your journal should live in your book bag. It should only come out when it is time to write in them. Then they go immediately back to the book bag.”

First Day of Family Message Journals

I began the first day of journal writing by teaching the friendly letter format, using the five parts of the letter: heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature. The lesson went quickly, as most students were introduced to the concept of friendly letters in second grade. For the first day, in order to get the students off to a positive start, I provided the first sentence, “Dear _____, Today we are starting our Family Message Journals. We learned _____.”

Then students brainstormed possibilities for the rest of the letter, which had to be at least two sentences long. The students came up with the following list, which had been recorded in the Researcher’s Reflective Journal:

Jordan: Today we learned how to do our ABCs with our hands.

Christina: We learned how to do punctuation, capitalization, and other apostrophe marks.

Hailey: Can I write it long?

Shane: Can we say that we're studying a fish?

After brainstorming, I gave the instructions for the class. They were to think of at least two more sentences about something learned that day. I added that from now on, I would tell them the specific topic they would write about, but that what they chose to write about within that topic was their choice.

I circulated the room, answering any questions. The students were plainly excited about the prospect of their first entry and response. Many students quietly shared what topic they chose, and a few asked for spelling help. When they asked me for help in spelling specific words, I encouraged them to "sound it out" instead of telling them the answer.

Ethan's entry on the first day:

August Date 8/27/07

Dear Mom and dad,

Today we are starting family message journals. We are studing ower fish bubba the betta in science. Ower reading story of the week is Nate The Great.

Love,Ethan

Alan's entry on the first day:

August 27, 2007

Dear Mom,

Today we are starting family message Journals. We learnd how to spell in singh language. We learnd were to put punshuwashion marks too.Love, Alan

Student Profiles

The following student profiles of the six case study students are excerpts from the Researcher's Reflective Journal. Factual information is interspersed with personal reflection to give the reader a more vicarious look at the case study students.

Timothy, Case #1

Timothy is an 8-year-old Black male who lives with his single-parent mother and two older, teenaged brothers. He has a behavior chart that he must have signed each evening to let his mom know what kind of day he had. He is impulsive and seldom thinks before acting when it comes to controlling his behavior. Timothy's standardized test scores from his past school are incomplete. In her Parents' Homework, Timothy's mom acknowledged that he is a hard worker, yet he is easily distracted. Within the last 2 weeks, Timothy has been diagnosed ADHD and has begun taking medication. He will tell you that he knows he is "supposed to help the medicine work. It won't do it by itself." Timothy is very affectionate and has a "huge crush" on the researcher, which he discusses with his mother in his journal.

Ethan, Case #2

This school year is Ethan's second in Georgia. His dad runs a "fancy concrete business" according to Ethan, and his mom stays at home with his baby brother and sister. Ethan also has an older brother in middle school. Ethan is very bright and has an uplifting personality. In the Parents' Homework, Ethan's mom lists social skills as one of his strengths. She added that he has an ability to adapt and is a great helper to others. She shared that he really misses Ohio. Academically, Ethan excels and exceeded standards in reading on last year's CRCT.

Alan, Case #3

Alan reminds me of Huckleberry Finn. With his flaming red hair and freckles and very Southern accent, Alan is the epitome of “all boy.” Last year, he was on medication for previously diagnosed ADHD. This year, however, his parents are trying, and struggling, with using praise and rewards instead of medication. Alan lives with his parents, his older sister, and a younger sister. He is active in baseball and Boy Scouts. Both parents are very involved and supportive. She writes that he is sometimes impulsive and too energetic. Academically, Alan is right on target. On his second-grade CRCT, he exceeded standards in reading.

Kimberly, Case Study #4

Kimberly could very well be considered the perfect student. Prim, proper, and gifted, she is a teacher’s dream and a parent’s gift. Kimberly’s self-esteem could scarcely be higher, due to the steady stream of praise from her parents. Her dad works for a phone company and her mom is a homemaker. She has one little brother. On the Parents’ Homework, Kimberly’s mom reported that Kimberly’s strengths were “intelligence, almost too smart for me, compassionate, mature, generous, patient, tolerant, outgoing, friendly, brave, and more.” She also noted that a weakness was “being dramatic” and that she was very eager to please the teacher, but not so eager to please her mom at home. Academically, Kimberly is gifted and attends our county’s gifted program, Odyssey, once a week. On last year’s CRCT test, Kimberly scored an almost perfect score in reading. Both Kimberly’s parents participated in the Family Message Journals. Her mom was our room mother and her dad attended both field trips

with our class. Her parents are certainly role models for their support of their child's education.

Dalton, Case Study #5

Dalton lives with his mom and step-father, one brother, and a step-sister. Dalton has had a difficult time adjusting to his parents' divorce and an even harder time adjusting to his new step-father. He is a bit overweight and has said that other kids make fun of him. His self-esteem has suffered and his mother reported a return of problems with anger and behavior that were a problem last year, but had gotten better. Dalton's mom wrote me two lengthy notes, one in November and one in December, voicing her concerns. I had not really noticed any behavior changes at school, but his behavior and attitude at home had taken a significant turn for the worse. In the last several months, I have noticed him becoming more social with his classmates, as well as a behavior problem at school. On the Parents' Homework, Dalton's mom wrote that she considered his communication skills, handwriting, and his imagination as his strengths. She saw weaknesses in understanding directions and completing work on time. She acknowledged that Dalton is sweet, sensitive, and always looking for approval from grown-ups and peers. Academically, Dalton is a good student. He is conscientious and a hard worker. Dalton did not attend school in this county last year, and I have no CRCT scores from second grade for him. Dalton began the year with some struggles with fluency.

Shaun, Case Study #6

Shaun just celebrated his ninth birthday. He is what my grandmother called "built thick" – not chubby, but solid. He is one of the tallest students in my class, and

baseball is his priority. Shaun's home life is not what one would call stable. He lives with his single-parent mother, an older brother, and one sister. His mother, twice divorced, also has two stepsons from her second marriage. Shaun, as well as his two siblings, is severely ADHD and there are many days that he comes to school without having taken his medication. Other days, he has told me that he took one of his brother's pills. Shaun's mother, according to her, has a difficult time with discipline and the management of her household. Throughout the year, various materials have gone home that require a parent's signature but never return. As expected, the consent form for this study took much effort to retrieve. Academically, Shaun is struggling. He has excellent coping skills, and is an extraordinary listener. He does not have a learning disability, but he definitely missed "something" in those critical years of learning to read. Shaun could benefit from one-on-one tutoring that I cannot provide in my classroom. Shaun's mother did not return the Parents' Homework, nor did she attend our scheduled interview. She also did not attend our rescheduled interview. She did not return interview questions I sent in the mail as a last resort.

Results Reported by Research Question

In this section, results will be reported by research question. For the central question, results will be reported for each case study student. At the beginning of each case study student's results presentation, the first and the last journal entries are provided so that the reader may compare beginning and ending writing samples of that student.

Central Research Question: How can writing instruction through Family Message Journals impact third grade students' writing ability?

Timothy, Case #1

Figures 4 and 5 represent Timothy's first and final entries.

August 27/2007

Dear Mom,

Today we are starting Family Message Journals.

Today we went to check out books a we went to P.E. And we learned how to do A.B.C with are hands.

Love, [redacted]

[redacted]

Great! [redacted] the message Journals are going to be alot of fun. I see you got the football book today I know you will enjoy reading that. Learning to do A.B.C's. with your hands. Now! I don't even know how to do that maybe you can teach me. Well, mommy loves you Keep up the good work.

Love mom.

Figure 4. Timothy's first journal entry with his mom's response in August.

12/17/07

Dear Mom,

Today I learned about these people.
 Mary Bethune was chosen scholarship
 at Scotia Seminary in North Carolina.
 She was the fifteen of seventeen child.
 Paul Revere told stories about a man
 who risked his life for the colonists.
 Fredrick Douglass had a life time of
 fireless fighting. He taught himself how
 to write and reading. Susan B. Anthony
 made ladies vote.

Love,

Figure 5. Timothy's last journal entry in December.

Domain 1: Conventions

The Conventions Domain assesses sentence formation, usage, and mechanics. Table 4 illustrates Timothy's weekly performance on basic mechanics, as well as the number of sentences, characters per word, and words per sentence. Each weekly entry was also word processed into Microsoft Word 2007 in order to obtain a grade equivalent of the entry.

Table 4

Timothy's Family Message Journal Weekly Conventions Data

Week	# of Sent	# of Words	Spell Err %	Cap. Err %	Punct. Err %	Grade Equiv	Char/ Word	Words/ Sent
1	7	44	11	2	2	1.7	3.8	5.2
2	5	47	21	3	3	1.1	3.6	8.3
3	7	58	6	0	3	0.9	3.6	7.4
4	6	54	5	0	3	0.8	3.8	5.8
5	4	40	5	0	0	1.9	4.1	5.3
6	9	72	5	1	6	1.7	3.5	5.0
7	7	49	2	0	0	1.6	3.7	6.1
8	6	61	6	3	3	2.6	3.5	9.8
9	7	69	14	2	1	2.9	3.8	8.0
10	5	55	3	3	1	3.1	3.8	9.4
11	7	57	5	1	3	3.0	3.6	6.8
12	5	50	8	4	4	2.4	4.5	6.0
13	5	95	4	3	5	5.0	5.3	17.8
14	5	55	3	5	0	5.6	4.6	9.6
15	9	115	12	2	3	3.9	3.8	12.1
16	2	30	6	3	3	4.4	6.0	15.0

Journal writing for my class came each day after students returned from their independent Success Maker computer program. Timothy was one of the slower workers on this computer program. Therefore, he often got a late start on journals. This delay hindered Timothy's journal writing time and consequently limited the length of his journal entries.

During the first month of Family Message Journals, according to the Flesch-Kinkaid Grading Scale, Timothy's writing scored an average grade-level equivalent of 1.4. During the last four weeks, Timothy's average grade-level equivalent was 4.7, a significant improvement.

Early on, Timothy's most apparent weaknesses were in subject/verb agreement and spelling. Regarding subject/verb agreement, for example, during the third week, four of Timothy's seven sentences contained subject/verb agreement errors. At his weakest point, Week 5 contained 75% subject/verb errors. However, the last 4 weeks of the project contained absolutely no subject/verb agreement errors at all.

Spelling was another weakness in Timothy's writing. He began Week 1 with 11% of his words misspelled. Week 2 (Figure 6) was the height of spelling errors with 21%.

9-4-07

Dear Mommy,

We had did seince on Bubba the Berta. The seince was to get the mirror. I thought is was going to thing its a girl fish. My hypothesis was wrong. He was trying to cell himself. Because he theight it was a nother fish. To Mom Love

Figure 6. Timothy's spelling errors in Week 2.

Timothy's spelling proficiency increased markedly until toward the end of the data collection period. Interestingly, he began taking more risks with his vocabulary toward the end of the journal project, increasing his spelling errors.

Capitalization and punctuation were Timothy's strengths and continued to improve throughout the Family Message Journal project. He also had a good grasp of complete sentences and had few errors concerning fragments or run-on sentences.

Domain 2: Ideas

The Ideas Domain concentrates on focus or clarity, supporting details, use of resources, and development or completeness of the entry. Timothy had a definite weakness with these elements in some entries. He did, however, improve as the project continued and as he became more mindful of his audience (Figure 7).

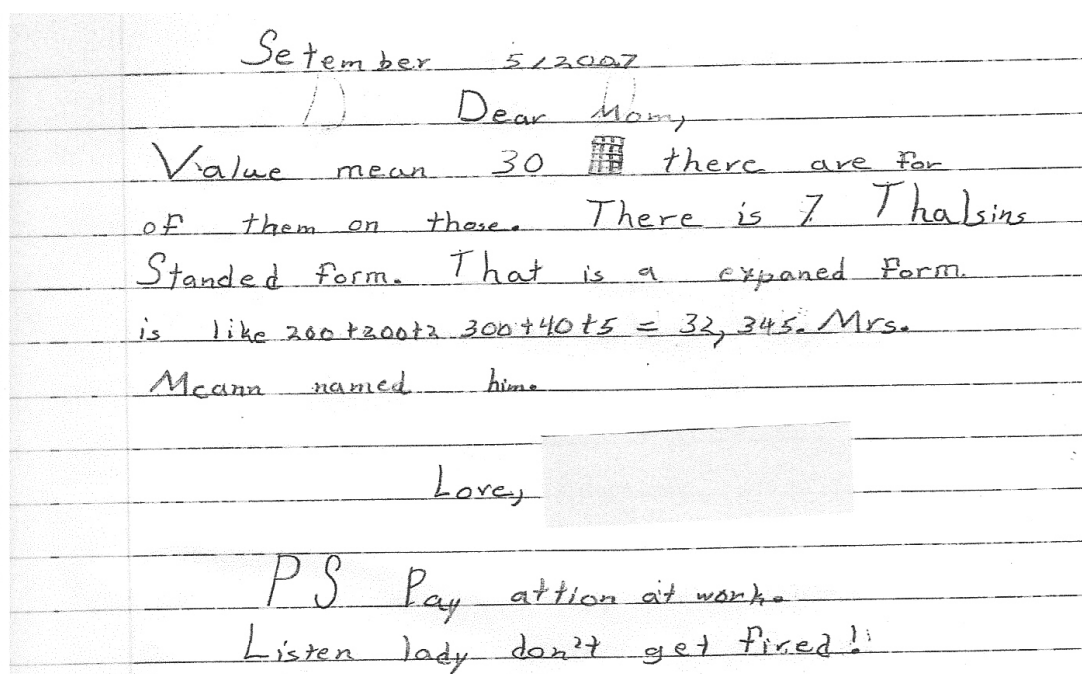


Figure 7. Timothy's September 5th entry illustrates issues with the Ideas Domain.

Timothy leaves the reader puzzled as to what he means by, "Value mean 30." Then, "there are for of them on those" makes little sense. "There is 7 Thalsins

(thousands) Standard form” is an attempt to explain that 7,000 means 7 thousands in standard form. Finally, when Timothy states, “Mrs. McCann named him,” he was actually referring to an earlier entry in which his mom asked who named our class fish. This statement does not belong in this same paragraph and probably confused his reader further. Timothy did, however, have a good idea to use a P.S. to tease his mother about work.

This same entry uses no supporting details to help Timothy’s mother decipher the concept of Standard Form in math. He did try using a picture of some base ten rods as a resource to aid her understanding, but without proper development of the idea, she still undoubtedly had a difficult time understanding Timothy’s entry.

The entry below (Figure 8), from the next week, shows Timothy’s weakness in a lack of focus in his writing.

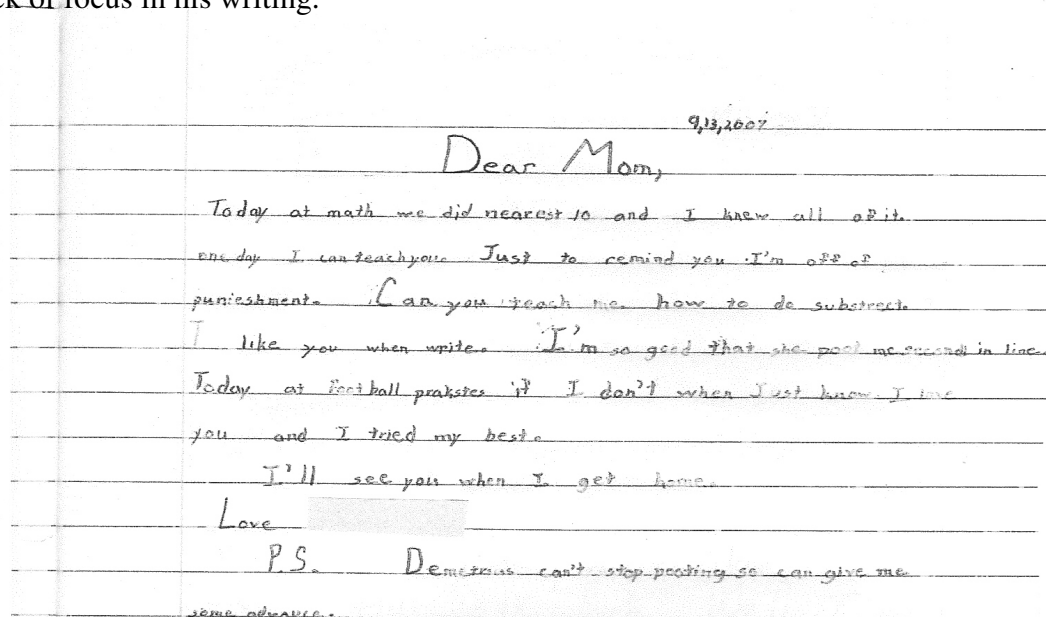


Figure 8. Timothy’s September 13th entry demonstrates problems with focus.

Timothy begins this entry with a nice topic sentence to introduce his mom to our topic on estimation, but then he suddenly jumps to remind his mom he is “off of punishment” and then asks her to teach him how to subtract. Next, in the same paragraph he tells his mom he is glad I moved him to be second in line (when we go in the hall). Then a surprise P.S. informs Timothy’s mother of another student’s flatulence problem!

As with the conventions elements of sentence formation, usage, and mechanics, Timothy improved tremendously with his clarity, use of supporting details, and development of ideas (Figure 9).

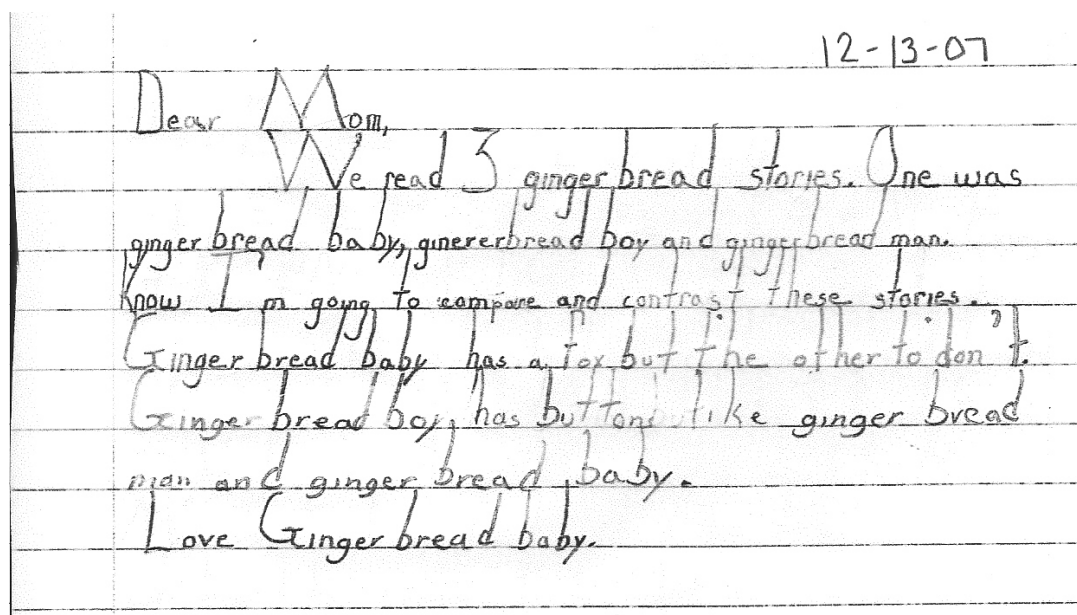


Figure 9. This December 13th entry shows Timothy’s improvement with clarity and focus.

Domain 3: Organization

The Organization Domain includes the elements of format, grouping of ideas, and transitions. Timothy had formatting problems for months during Family Message Journals. He experimented with several incorrect ways to date his entries before sticking

with the correct way that students were taught at the beginning of the project. He also had problems following the correct format for friendly letters, with the heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature in their correct positions (see Figure 10).

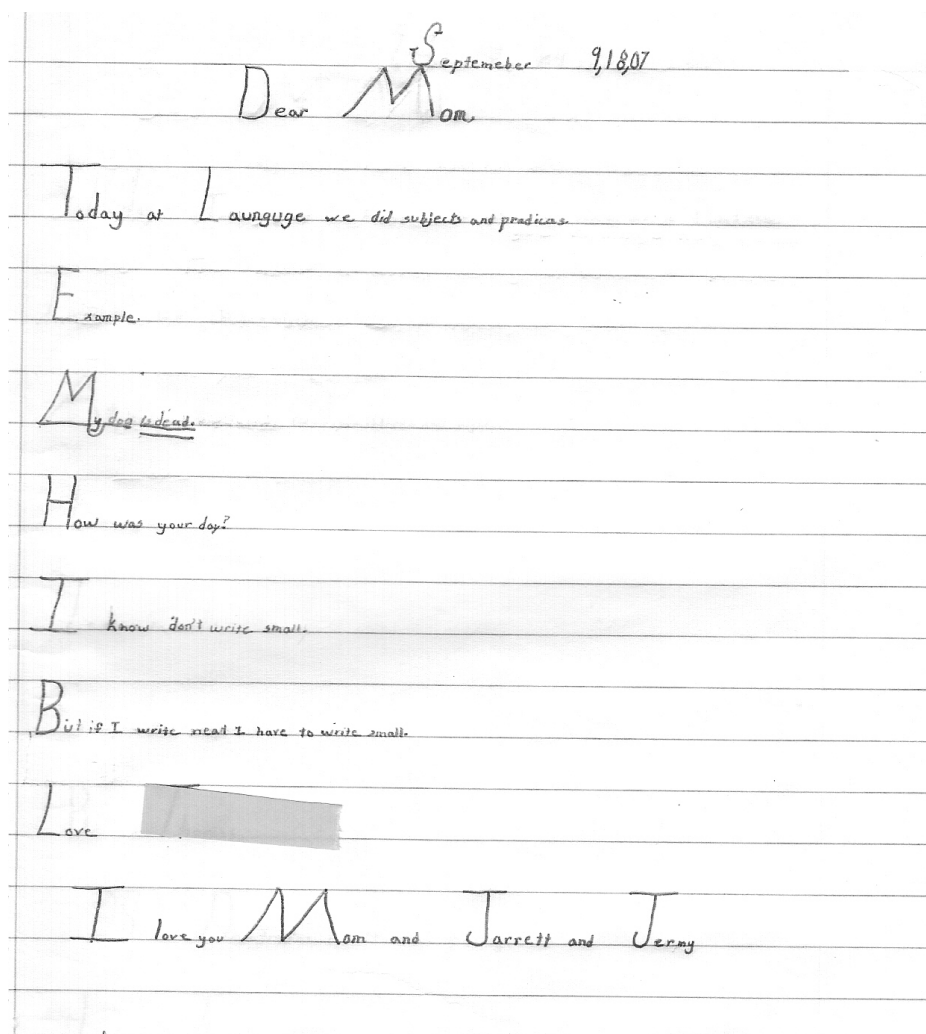


Figure 10. September 18th displays errors with the Organization Domain.

Timothy writes September as the date, but then also incorrectly writes 9,18,07 as well. He indents the heading instead of the first line of the body. Most prominently incorrect is the format of the body. He does not indent the closing, and there is no

punctuation before his signature, which is also positioned incorrectly. (The signature for this entry is covered to protect the privacy of the student.) Timothy uses one line for each sentence and his handwriting is so small that his mom's response, she tells him that she can barely see his entry.

There are no transitions in this entry; nor is there any logical grouping of ideas. Thomas was supposed to be explaining subjects and predicates. Interestingly, he chose to write, "My dog is dead," for his explanation. Then he asked about his mom's day and changed subjects again about his handwriting. Thomas continued this same incorrect format for several weeks. He enjoyed experimenting with style and format to see what reaction he would get from me and from his mom. While Figure 11 still needs work, Timothy has come a long way.

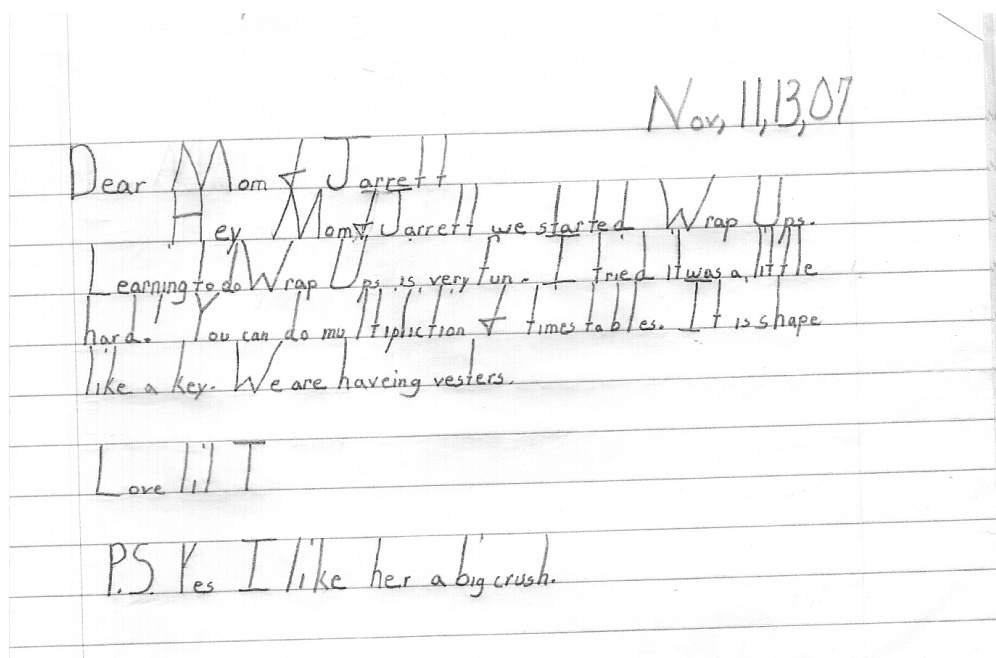


Figure 11. Timothy's organization skills, especially formatting, improved.

Timothy now writes the date on the right side of the paper, though he still uses commas instead of dashes to separate the month, date, and year. He has learned to consistently place his greeting at the margin and indent the first line of the body. Within the body of this entry, Timothy stuck to the topic of Wrap Ups (a math manipulative used to teach multiplication). Only at the very end does he add that we are having “vesters” (visitors) in our class that day. Timothy’s closing is not in the correct position and he does not capitalize his nickname. He used his P.S. to tell his mom that he had a crush on me. Overall, this entry illustrates a huge improvement over his earlier entries regarding organization.

Domain 4: Style

The Style Domain contains elements such as author’s voice and audience awareness. Timothy definitely developed his author’s voice as the Family Message Journal project progressed. He has a wildly colorful personality, full of life with a contagious sense of humor, and his personality emerges when communicating to his mother and his brothers. Audience awareness was not much of a problem for Timothy. He was acutely aware of his audience while he discussed his behavior, his punishment, and when he asked for Christmas gifts.

Figure 12 shows Timothy writing that his mom has homework tonight. The assignment was to ask parents if they knew the names of certain local, state and federal government officials. Timothy apparently enjoys telling his mom that she has homework. Unfortunately, he never told her what it was! His teasing nature comes out as he tells his mom that he will not help her with her homework. Their playful banter continues when

Timothy's mom puts her son back in his place, informing him that he has homework every night whether it is officially assigned or not.

✱

Dear Mom,

Today I don't have homework but the teacher said that the teacher said for parents to do. Don't even ask me to help do it. Oh because I am doing it. The one who makes the laws is George Bush. The one who makes our nation laws are Legislative.

What is my homework
 You have homework everyday even if your teacher doesn't give you any. Now if George Bush makes the laws who do we call him?
 Also, do he make the laws or do he approve the laws? And do you know how many people are in the legislative? Try and find out and let me know what you come up with. Have a good day!

Love mom

Figure 12. Timothy never told his mom what her homework was.

From the beginning, Timothy was acutely aware of the power of his voice in communicating with his mother in his journal. Mostly, he used his charm and flattery to try to get back into her good graces. Figure 13 explains the four kinds of sentences and then abruptly begins a humble note about being in trouble.

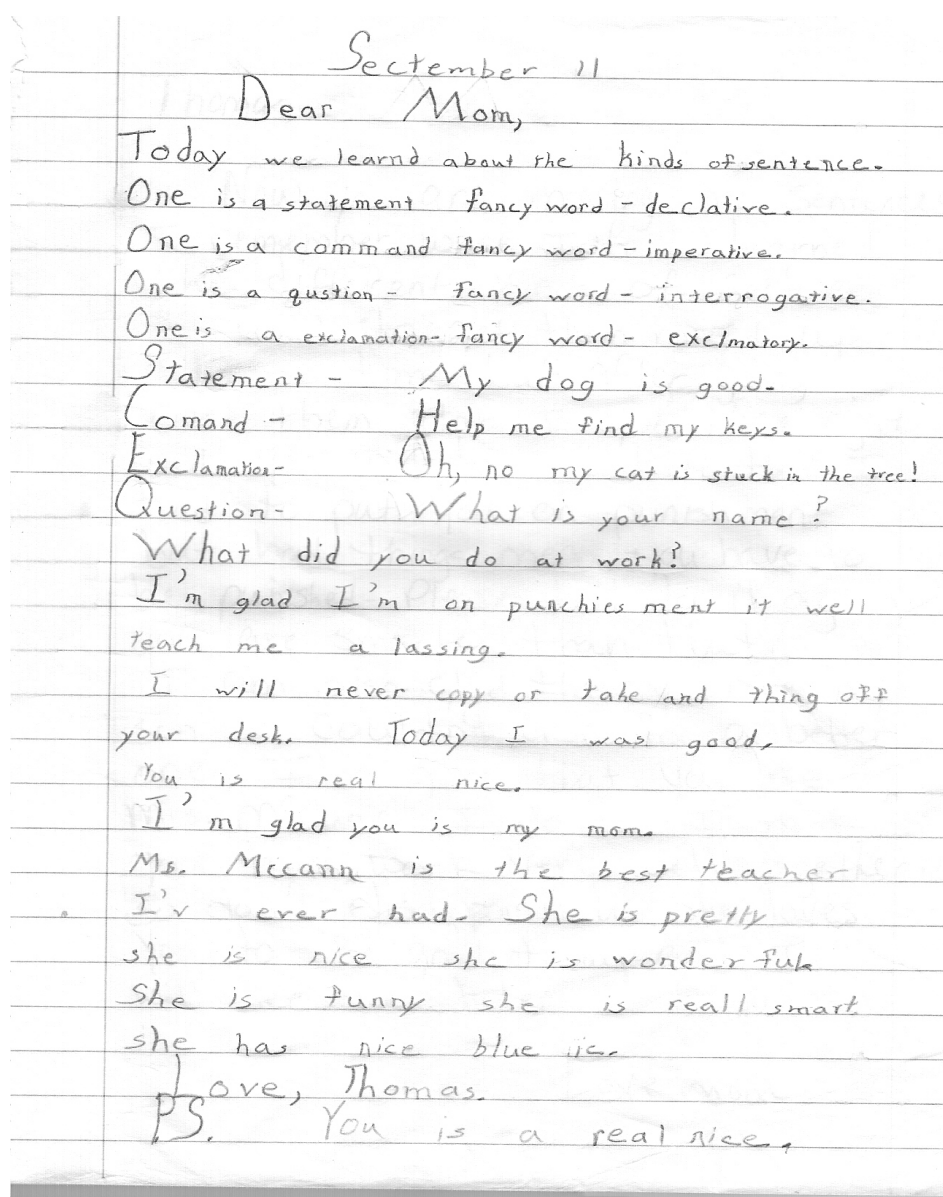


Figure 13. Timothy displays audience awareness.

Another aspect of audience awareness that Timothy displayed was using his Family Message Journal as a means for parental requests. Timothy cleverly used this mode of communication more than any other student in my class. Following are some examples:

- August 29 Can you come and read the book with us?
- October 1 P.S. Can you find a new job?
- October 2 Do you accept my apologe?
- October 4 Please help me find my library book?
- October 8 Will you take me to the library?
- October 8 Can you buy me a new game for my game boy?
- October 11 Can we all set at the table today?
- November 7 Can you tell Adrina to buy me something [for Christmas]?

Summary

Timothy was always enthusiastic about Family Message Journals and took pride in his improvement. From the the first week until the end of the Family Message Journal project, Timothy's writing grade equivalent increased from an average of 1.4 in the first four weeks of journals to an average of 4.7 in the last four weeks. For Timothy, this suggests a significant improvement. Similarly, Timothy had significant increases in the number of words he used in a sentence and the number of characters per word. His biggest weakness, subject/verb agreement, improved until he had no subject/verb

mistakes at all during the last four weeks of the journals. Timothy's spelling proficiency increased as well. Timothy did discover his author's voice. His playful, yet mischievous charm comes through clearly. He is keenly aware of his audience, as he dispersed his charm generously to his mother.

Timothy's weaknesses still include format and clarity. In her interview, Timothy's mother agreed that her son's spelling improved noticeably during the Family Message Journal project. She also noted that, "After a while, he began to write the journals with much more detail. As time went by the entries became more lengthy." She also acknowledged that he could use more improvement with making complete sentences.

Timothy shared in his own interview that he thought his handwriting had improved, saying, "I used to write sloppy. Then I used to write small. Now I write big *and* good (Timothy's interview, February 4, 2007). Timothy acknowledged that he still needed to work on indenting. He also noticed, "And I need to work on where I write 'Love, Timothy' and remember to put the date. I need to, like, remember to stop at that red line."

Ethan, Case #2

Ethan's first and final entries are illustrated in Figures 14 and 15.

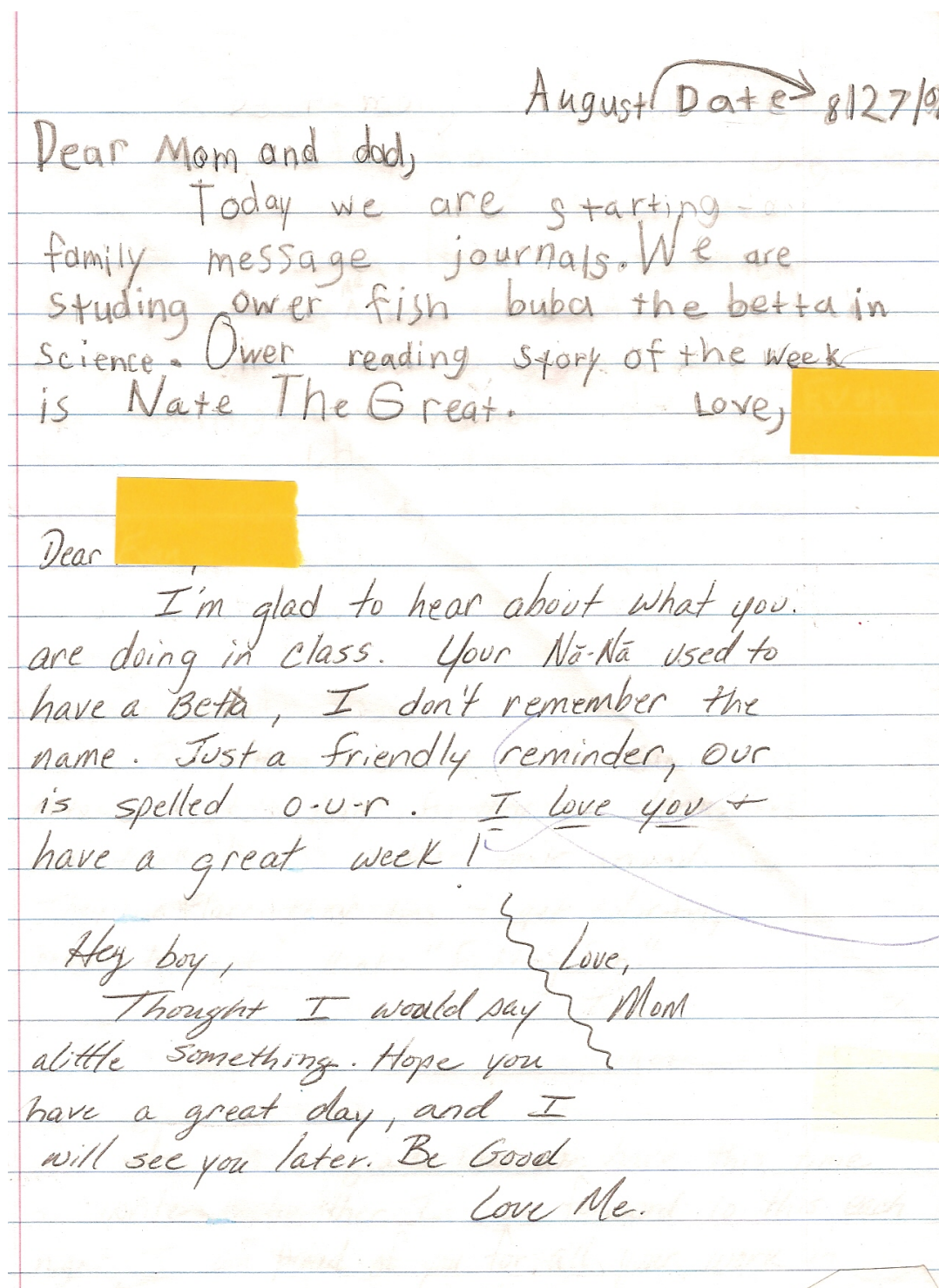


Figure 14. Ethan's first Family Message Journal entry with parents' responses.

Author: [REDACTED]

Dear parents, The Gingerbread
Grinch

Once upon a time
 There was a old couple, they never
 bought a pet never even had a
 child our a neighbor they lived way out
 in the ^{they were} woods. So they ^{very} lonely.
 So they went down
 the road to a supermarket. They
 picked up all the engreance ^{they} needed.
 Then they went home. They put that
 ginger bread grinch in the oven. He started
 to bake then they heard a loud noise.
 Looked at the door there was the
 gingerbread grinch. So the old couple
 ran as fast as they could. They started
 to slow down, then the gingerbread
 grinch said run run as fast as can
 ya can't catch me I'm the gingerbread
 grinch. So the he went up hill and
 made a house ^{it bitty} out of twigs. Then the next
 day He wakeup, He ran out side the he
 saw something gold it was jagwire, when the
 gingerbread grinch saw that jagwire he ran very very
 ery fast. Then jag wire ran ^{run} fast and ^{faster} and then ginbread
 said run ^{run} as fast as ya can't catch ^{to} cause I'm
 the gingerbread grinch. So he went back to his
 over page 9

little house. He took a nap. He woke up the next day. And there was something big sniffing his door. Its voice sounded like a tiger so the gingerbread grinch ran out the door and all around the woods, then finally the tiger started to slow down, and the gingerbread grinch got away. That same day a giant grizzly bear started to follow him. Then the gingerbread grinch ran in full speed, they ran for hours then the grizzly bear got tired so then the grizzly bear found somewhere to sleep some far the gingerbread grinch, and the gingerbread grinch climbed up a cedar tree and it close to christmas and that cedar tree got cut down to be a christmas tree, and ya know what that family that cut down that cedar tree had a good dessert.

The End

Figure 15. Ethan's final Family Message Journal entry December 17, 2007.

Domain 1: Conventions

Table 5 illustrates Ethan’s weekly performance on basic mechanics, as well as the number of sentences, characters per word, and words per sentence. Each weekly entry was also word processed into Microsoft Word 2007 in order to obtain a grade equivalent of the entry.

Table 5

Ethan’s Family Message Journal Weekly Conventions Data								
Week	# of Sent	# of Words	Spell Err %	Cap. Err%	Punct. Err %	Grade Equiv	Char/ Word	Words/ Sent
1	3	21	24	19	14	2.2	3.9	6.5
2	6	20	20	10	14	2.9	7.1	2.6
3	4	43	4	7	4	2.0	3.5	9.0
4	5	45	6	2	0	0.8	3.6	9.0
5	12	68	9	10	1	5.0*	3.7	5.3
6	27	170	14	4	2	2.1	3.9	6.2
7	9	60	6	2	3	2.4	3.7	6.4
8	10	57	5	3	3	1.4	3.8	5.7
9	6	50	12	4	4	4.7	4.0	8.0
10	7	38	18	3	3	1.8	3.9	5.1
11	6	65	3	3	5	3.4	3.6	10.5
12	11	71	3	4	6	2.9	4.1	6.2
13	6	38	3	3	0	2.8	4.2	6.0
14	5	34	3	6	3	2.7	3.8	6.4
15	9	76	8	9	1	3.7	4.3	8.2
16	23	313	5	6	7	4.8	4.4	13.5

Note: Ethan scored a grade equivalent of 5.0 in week 5 due to the word “responsibility” being used 3 times. Microsoft Word 2007’s Flesch Kincade grading scale counts word syllables as part

of criteria. This 6-syllable word skewed the grade equivalent results for this entry. When “responsibility” was replaced by “duty” the grade equivalent fell to 1.5.

The Conventions Domain assesses sentence formation, usage, and mechanics.

During the first month of Family Message Journals, according to the Flesch-Kinkaid Grading Scale, Ethan scored an average grad-level equivalent of 1.8, choosing one entry a week for the first four weeks. During the last 4 weeks, choosing one entry a week, Evan’s average writing grade equivalent was 3.5. This is not a significant gain for Evan, considering his academic potential. The length of his sentences did increase from about seven words per sentence early on, to about ten words per sentence toward the end, but he continued to use small words, only about 3.5 characters per word, throughout the entire Family Message Journal project.

Spelling was a weak element in Ethan’s writing. In week one, 24% of Ethan’s words had spelling errors. This figure never got below 3%. However, Ethan’s spelling is weak at times because he takes risks with exploring new vocabulary.

The entry below is an early example of Ethan’s spelling mistakes. He tried to use what our class calls “fancy words.” These are words, mostly adjectives, on posters in the classroom that students can use to replace “overused” words such as *big*, *small*, and *fat*. When students experiment with the “fancy words” in their writing, they do not always use the words in the correct context, but it is a good beginning.

The topic was a creative writing paragraph explaining to their parents that their teacher is really a queen. The “fancy words” are supposed to be: *marvelous*, *ebullient*, *patient*, *frightened*, *envious*, and *unpleasant* (Figure 16).

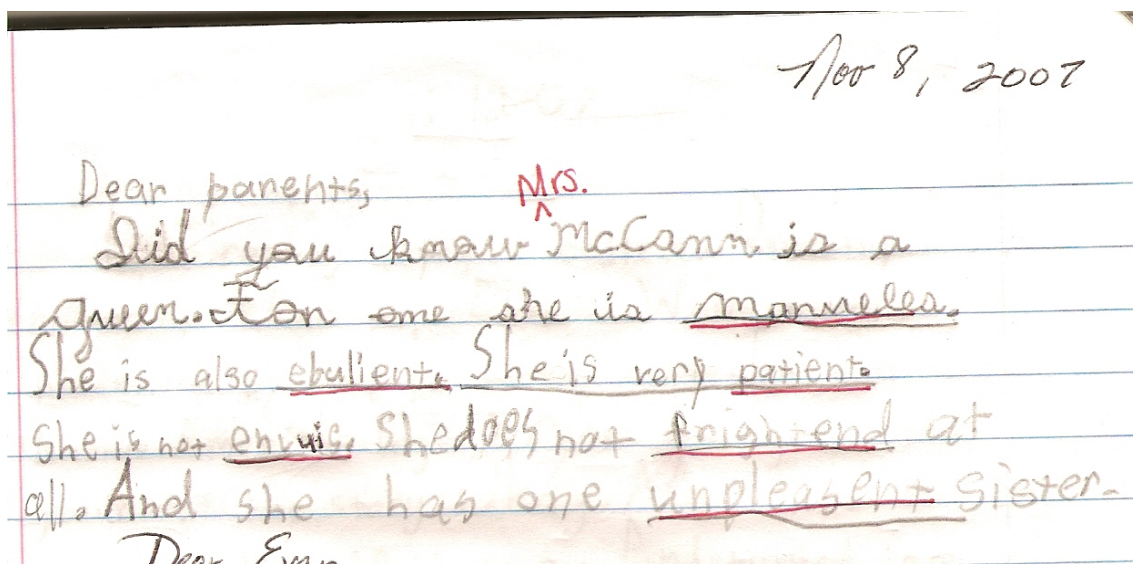


Figure 16. Entry illustrating Ethan's use of "fancy words" misspelled.

Ethan's capitalization and punctuation proficiency were average for his class, and did not vary significantly during the Family Message Journal project.

Domain 2: Ideas

The Ideas Domain checks elements such as clarity, focus, and development of ideas. For the most part, Ethan's entries were detailed as he kept his audience in mind. Ethan's entries from beginning to end of the Family Message Journal project depict a significant improvement in clarity.

In the Figure 17 entry, Ethan never explained the meaning of the array or its purpose. Out of nowhere he tells his parents, "Ow and our class is going to spongbod for halloween." Then he jumps back to arrays to show an example, but still there is no explanation. In fact, he tells Mom to "figure it out." Also, he meant to say that our class fish, Bubba, is going to be Spongebob for Halloween.

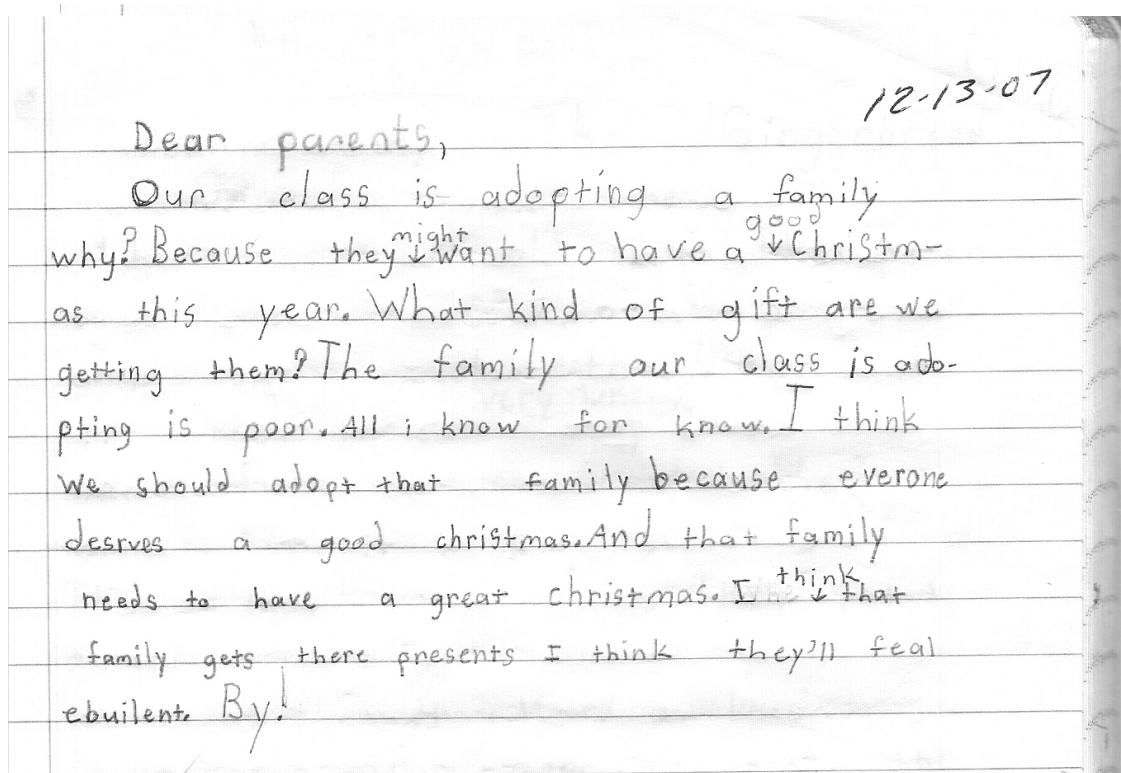


Figure 18. Ethan's example entry showing improved clarity.

Domain 3: Organization

The Organization Domain looks for format and grouping of ideas. Ethan had major formatting problems early in the Family Message Journal project. It was not until Week 4 that he remembered to put the date on his entry. Often, he wrote the closing and signature somewhere above the top margin. He had no concept of margins, either. Figure 19 shows an early sample of Ethan's illustrating this description.

Figure 19. September 5, 2007, example of Ethan's formatting problems.

Figure 20 depicts Ethan's later formatting improvement. Ethan never quite mastered including the date correctly on his entries. Actually, this entry is one the few

for which Ethan included a date. Usually, one of his parents added the date at the top of the page.

Dear mam and daddy
 today I'm going to
 let yo know about how
 to write in different kinds
 of wds in math. example 1. place value
~~9,395~~ 9,395 3 is in ~~the~~ → the
 hundreds so it is 300. example 2.
 standard form 3,976. example number 3.
 expanded form $90,000 + 8,000 + 300 + 40 + 6$
 $9 = 98,349$. Love you.
 Sept 5, 2007

Figure 19. September 5, 2007, example of Ethan's formatting problems.

Dear parents, 12-6-07
 Well the field trip was
 great. We made fossils, tested rocks.
 And a long ride. You would've
 liked it. We had fun. It was a
 science center. Bye!
 Ethan

Figure 20. Ethan's formatting improvement in Week 14.

Organization of ideas was sometimes a problem for Ethan. He had a tendency early on to tack on other thoughts whenever they crossed his mind. The entry from Week 6 (Figure 21) illustrates Ethan did not remember to explain what Balto did in the first place to earn a statue in New York.

Name: _____ Date Oct. 4 07

Dear parents,

Hey! I'm going to tell you about Balto. It's based on a true story. It's about a dog New Saved Nome. In New York theres a statchew of him. Bye. Ps. Theres a movie of balto. Balto saved Nome by getting the medicine to Nome. Bye. dlogsled. love You. Lova

Figure 21. Ethan's organization was weak in Week 6.

Figure 22 shows the improvement in Ethan's ability to organize his ideas by Week 15.

Dear parents, 12-13-07

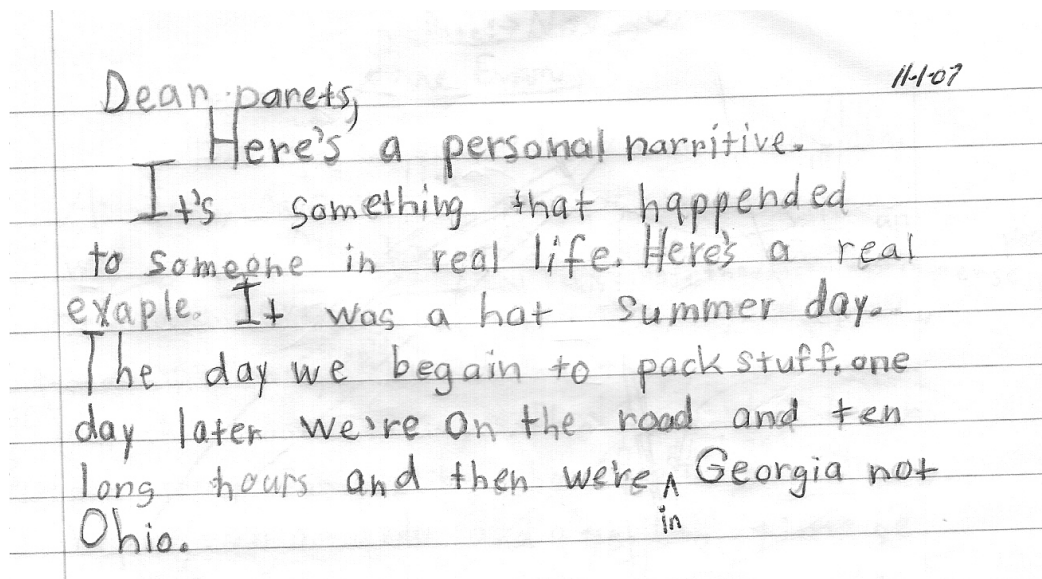
Our class is adopting a family why? Because they ^{might} want to have a ^{good} Christmas as this year. What kind of gift are we getting them? The family our class is adopting is poor. All i know for know, I think we should adopt that family because everone deserves a good christmas. And that family needs to have a great christmas. I ^{think} that family gets there presents I think they'll feel ebuilent. By!

Figure 22. Ethan's organization had improved in this Week 15 example.

Domain 4: Style

The style domain focuses on audience awareness and author's voice. As Ethan's mother and father wrote back to him every night, he was keenly aware of his audience. His parents made it clear how much they enjoyed responding to him, and he knew that at the end of the day, when he and his siblings were in bed, he was the focus of their time as they took turns writing in his Family Message Journal. Ethan often includes personal greetings after he has explained his topic for the day.

Figure 23 is an example of audience awareness. Ethan is expressing his feelings directly to his audience about their move from Ohio to Georgia. He used very simple terms for effect. Figure 24 shows his mother's response.



Dear parents, 11-1-07
 Here's a personal narrative.
 It's something that happened
 to someone in real life. Here's a real
 exaple. It was a hot summer day.
 The day we began to pack stuff, one
 day later we're on the road and ten
 long hours and then were ⁱⁿ Georgia not
 Ohio.

Figure 23. Ethan's entry illustrates audience awareness.

see you later.

Dear

Nov 1, 2007

One day our hearts won't ache as bad for home as they do now. Eventually, we'll look at Georgia as home too. Excellent example of a personal narrative. Have an awesome day! ♡ U

Love,
Mom

Figure 24. Ethan's mom's response about their move from Ohio.

Ethan's strategy was successful. Mom's response (Figure 24) proves that Ethan is proficient in audience awareness.

For the element of author's voice, Ethan was able to express himself well. He always seems content and easy going. His personality shines through in his journal entries. Even in the wake of Bubba the Betta's untimely death, Ethan's eulogy (Figure 25) highlights Bubba's finer qualities with a sly sense of humor. Notice Ethan's sad face illustration.

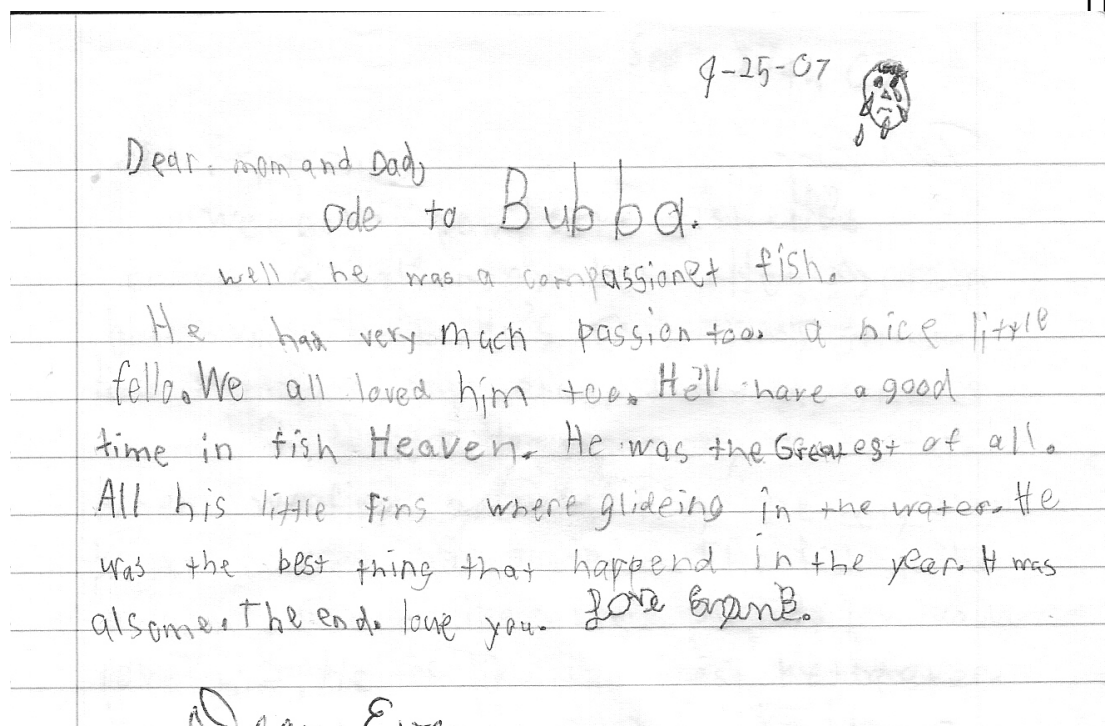


Figure 25. Ethan's author's voice is pleasantly clear in this eulogy for our class fish.

Summary

Regarding Conventions, Ethan's writing ability did improve, though not as significantly as his potential suggests it should. Intrinsically, Ethan's greater motivation was to communicate with his parents, not to improve his writing skills. He was proud of the improvement he did make, especially with handwriting, but he was most involved with writing back and forth with his parents. Of all the students in the class, Ethan verbally expressed the most sense of loss when we finished the project.

For the domains of Ideas and Organization, Ethan continued to forget to include the date and signature his entries, but he otherwise improved on format, organization,

and clarity. His handwriting is the most visible improvement, and the one that he is most proud of.

During his interview, Ethan thumbed through his Family Message Journal for a few minutes, recalling some of his favorite entries. I asked him what areas he thought had improved. He said he noticed that his writing had really gotten better. Most noticeable to Ethan was the length of his entries, and he was especially impressed with his own creative writing story *The Gingerbread Grinch*. I began the following exchange about using details:

Teacher: Ethan, are you telling me that through the Family Message Journals you learned how to write?

Ethan: I learned to use more details when I write so my stories will be more interesting to my parents. At the beginning of journals, I didn't really know what to write. But the more I practiced, I found out that you write, and then more stuff just pops up in your head. After you add details, more details come. It's like every five seconds, you think of more details in your head.

Teacher: Pretty cool how that happens, huh?

Ethan: Yea, like when I was reading out my Gingerbread Grinch story. You said you were amazed because you never knew we could be so detailed and have such a good ending.

(Interview with Ethan, February 7, 2008)

It is significant to note that both of Ethan's parents wrote almost every single night. His dad never missed an entry; mom missed a few when Ethan forgot to give her the journal at night and she left for work early. Both expressed how much they enjoyed the Family Message Journal experience.

In an interview with his mom and dad, Ethan's parents echoed exactly what their son thought was his most significant improvement: details. His mom said, "He

definitely got more descriptive. His focus really improved as time went by” (Interview with Ethan’s mom, February 22, 2008). Both parents noticed Ethan’s handwriting improvement. When asked what areas Ethan still needed to improve, both acknowledged that his spelling needed work. Ethan’s mom remarked, “I wanted to edit so bad! Then we got your note that we weren’t supposed to make any corrections. It just about killed me!” Her husband nodded and smiled in agreement

Ethan’s writing brings a unique style that reflects his personality. He is aware of his audience and enjoys their daily communication with him. The tiny illustrations that he and his dad draw for one another mirror their close relationship. Ethan’s author’s voice reveals a child whose wit is more mature than his years. It also whispers an appreciation for his parents that far exceeds any of his peers.

Alan, Case #3

Alan's first and last Family Message Journal entries are displayed in Figures 26 and 27.

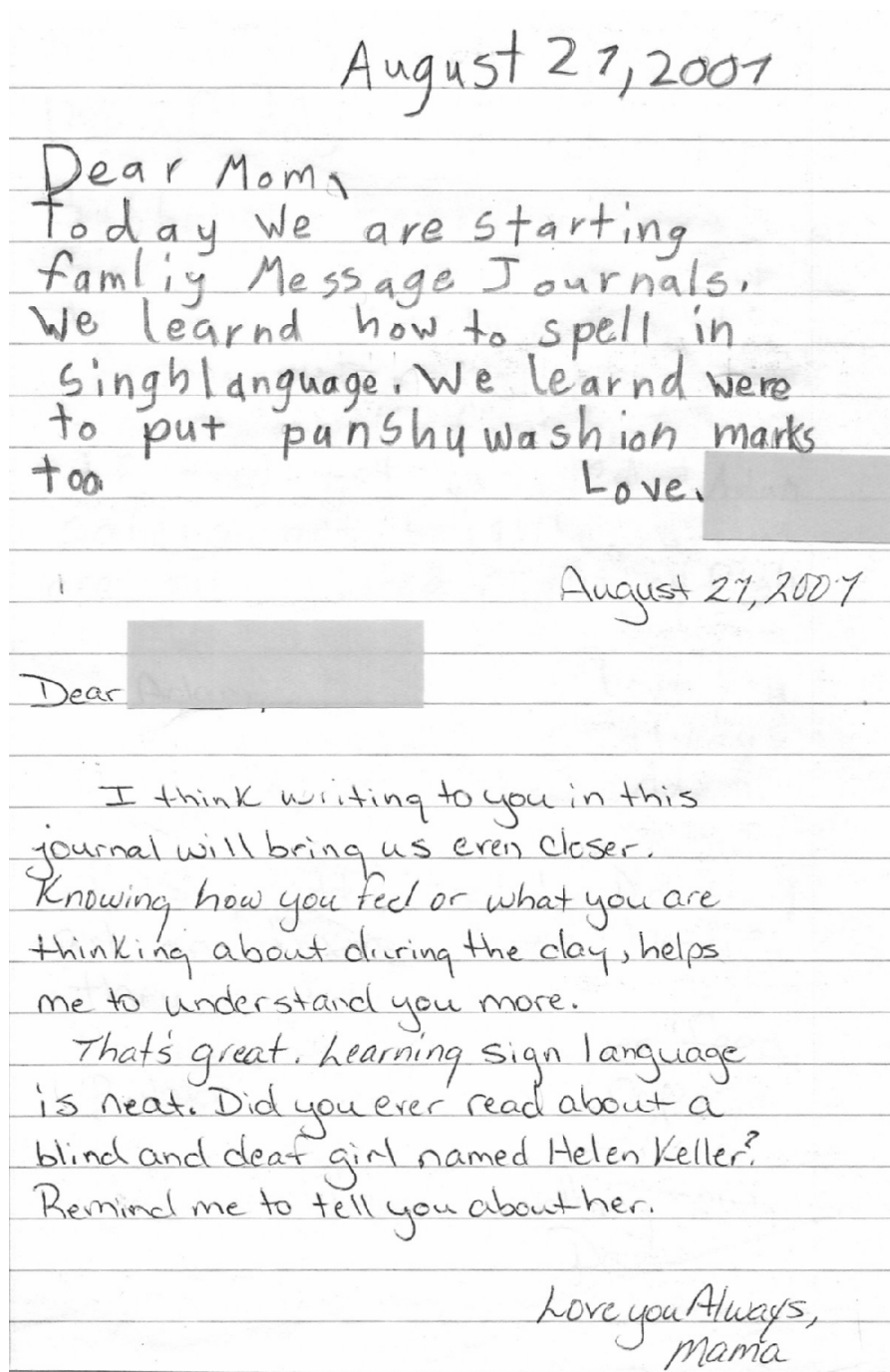


Figure 26. Alan's first Family Message Journal entry with parent's response.

Dear Mom

Here is a story called the gingerbread toddler he was just made by Ms. Cunningham. for Mr. Adam to eat. When it got out of the oven Mr. Adam said yummy what do I smell before he could finish saying that the gingerbread popped out of the oven at first he came to a cow, horse, pig, donkey and then a fox will take you across the road but he said no then he crossed the road and got ran over and that was the end of the gingerbread toddler.

p.s We learned love.
to right
in curseive.

Figure 27. Alan's final Family Message Journal entry, December 14, 2007.

Domain 1: Conventions

Table 6 illustrates Alan's weekly performance on basic mechanics, as well as the number of sentences, characters per word, words per sentence, and grade equivalent.

*Table 6**Alan's Family Message Journal Weekly Conventions Data.*

Week	# of Sent	# of Words	Spell Err %	Cap. Err%	Punct. Err %	Grade Equiv	Char/ Word	Words/ Sent
1	3	27	7	4	7	5.3	4.1	7.6
2	3	41	10	0	5	5.8	3.6	12.0
3	1*	25	20	0	8	9.6*	3.4	22.0*
4	2	36	17	17	22	3.6	3.5	15.0
5	3	33	3	11	6	4.4	3.9	10.0
6	3*	53	6	6	4	6.3*	3.8	16.0*
7	4	42	7	7	19	6.8	4.6	9.2
8	8	61	11	3	7	2.1	3.8	7.0
9	2*	48	13	8	13	8.7*	4.3	21.0*
10	4	35	6	3	9	5.4	4.6	7.5
11	3*	46	11	0	4	4.4*	3.8	13.6*
12	3	34	9	3	6	4.0	3.8	10.3
13	1*	24	13	8	29	8.5*	4.1	19.0*
14	3*	50	6	0	2	4.6*	3.8	15.0*
15	5	51	2	4	0	5.8	3.6	9.2
16	3*	102	11	5	18	11.4*	3.6	32.3*

Note: Alan's grade level equivalent is skewed due to run-on sentences. See discussion below.

The Conventions Domain focuses on sentence formation, usage, and mechanics. During the first month of Family Message Journals, choosing one entry per week, Alan's Flesch-Kinkaid Grade Level averaged 6.1. During the last four weeks, choosing one entry per week, Alan's average grade-level equivalent was 7.6, a significant improvement over the 4-month data collection period. However, the grade level equivalent scores for Alan are skewed for two reasons: Alan's primary weakness is run-on sentences, and the Flesch-Kinkaid Grading Scale is based on a formula that used sentence length as part of the formula. According to the Microsoft Windows 2007 Help Desk:

This test rates text on a U.S. school grade level. For example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader can understand the document. The formula for the Flesch-Kinkaid Grade Level Score is:

$$(.39 \times \text{ASL}) + (11.8 \times \text{ASW}) - 15.59$$

Where:

ASL = average sentence length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences)

ASW = average number of syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words)

Consequently, Alan's rampant use of run-on sentences inadvertently gave him credit for lengthy sentences, yielding misleading grade level equivalents. For example, in Week 16 Alan's original entry was 102 words, 3 sentences, 32.3 words per sentence, and yielded a grade equivalent of 11.4. However, when I edited Alan's entry by adding correct end punctuation, but leaving all else intact, the number of sentences changed from 3 to 7; words per sentences changed from 32.3 to 13.8; and the grade equivalent changed from 11.4 down to a more reasonable 4.2.

Spelling was not a problem for Alan. He was an above average speller in class, and rarely misspelled commonly used words. By the end of the study, he did show improvement correctly spelling words on the third-grade level and tended to primarily only misspell words that were reaching far above his grade level. The following example (Figure 28) shows a later entry, where Alan tries out a new word we learned.

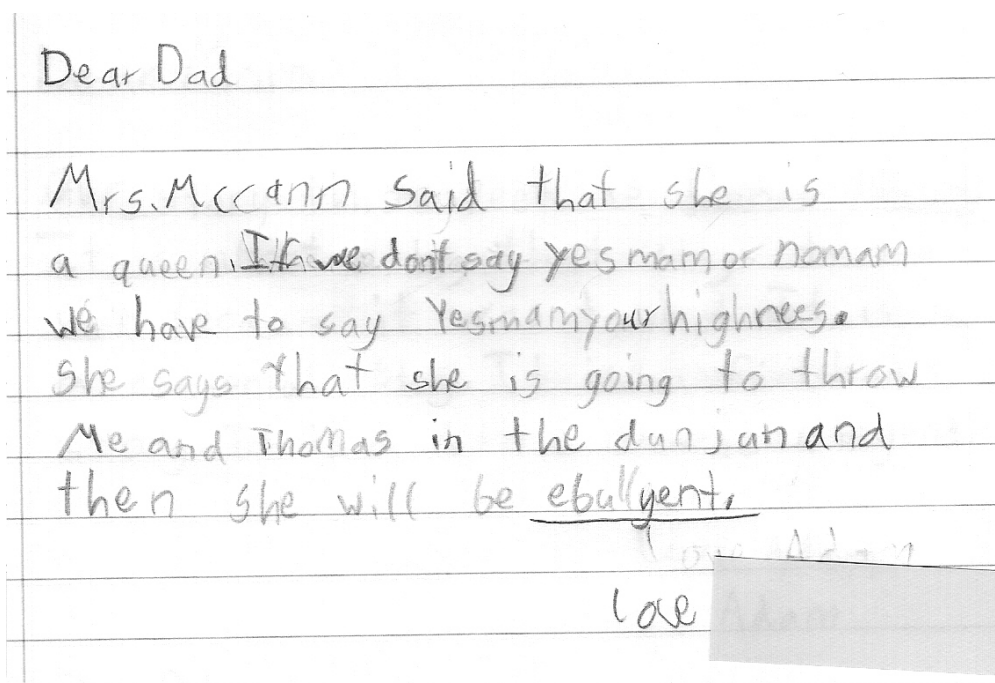


Figure 28. In Week 11, Alan experiments with above level vocabulary: ma'am, no ma'am, yes ma'am, Your Highness, dungeon, and ebullient.

Alan had very few problems with capitalization. Similarly, punctuation errors were kept to a minimum except for the run-on sentences.

Domain 2: Ideas

The Ideas Domain assesses entries for clarity, focus, and development of ideas.

Alan progressively improved with clarity throughout the Family Message Journal project. This early entry (from Week 4, Figure 29) leaves many questions in the mind of the reader. Likely confused, Alan's mom ignored his entry and instead discussed an upcoming carnival. Alan did not offer his mom enough to go on for communication to take place.

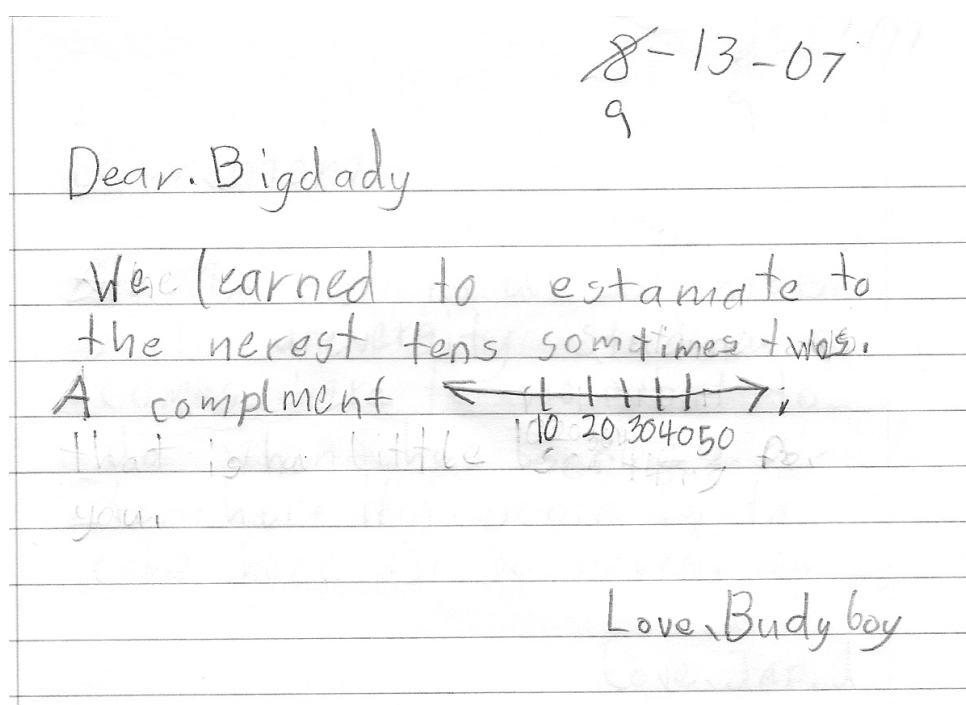


Figure 29. Illustrates Alan's clarity problems in Week 4.

Alan's clarity and focus improved as the Family Message Journal project progressed, as illustrated in Figure 30 about the types of rocks. Alan sticks to his subject, and even applies what he just learned to an upcoming family activity, geocaching. This is an excellent entry by Alan; though there are some capitalization issues, the content is correct, scoring a grade equivalent of 8.7.

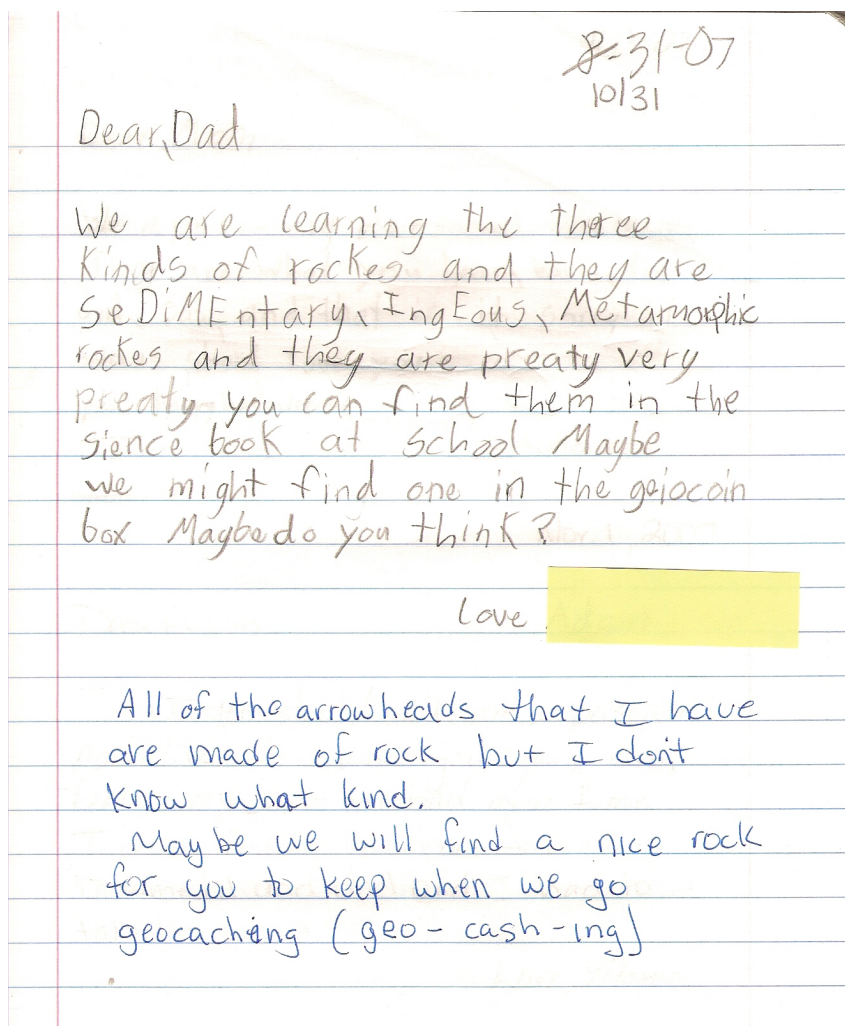


Figure 30. Alan has improved clarity and focus in Week 9.

Domain 3: Organization

The Organization Domain assesses format and grouping of ideas, as well as transitions. Alan's format changed little throughout the course of Family Message Journals. He consistently included the date. However, it was rarely correct. He was usually a month off! Early on, Alan kept placing the comma behind the "Dear" instead of after the name of the person he was greeting. He also never learned to drop down one line after the closing to include his signature. Alan never mastered indenting (see Figure 31).

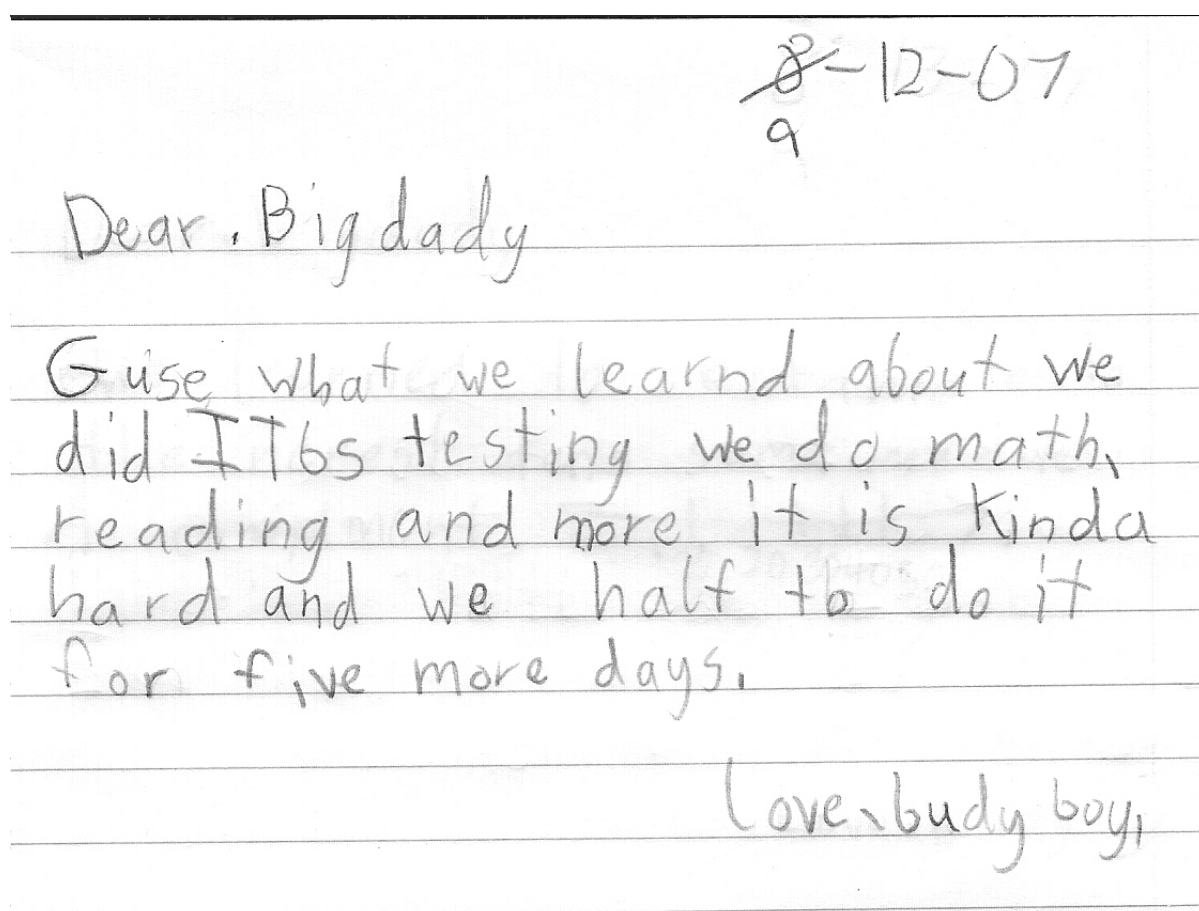


Figure 31. Alan's format in Week 4 depicts an incorrect date, incorrect greeting and closing, and no indenting at the body.

By this December entry (Figure 32), Alan had learned the correct placement for the comma in the greeting and the closing, and even began placing the signature in the correct position. Indenting would never become a habit.

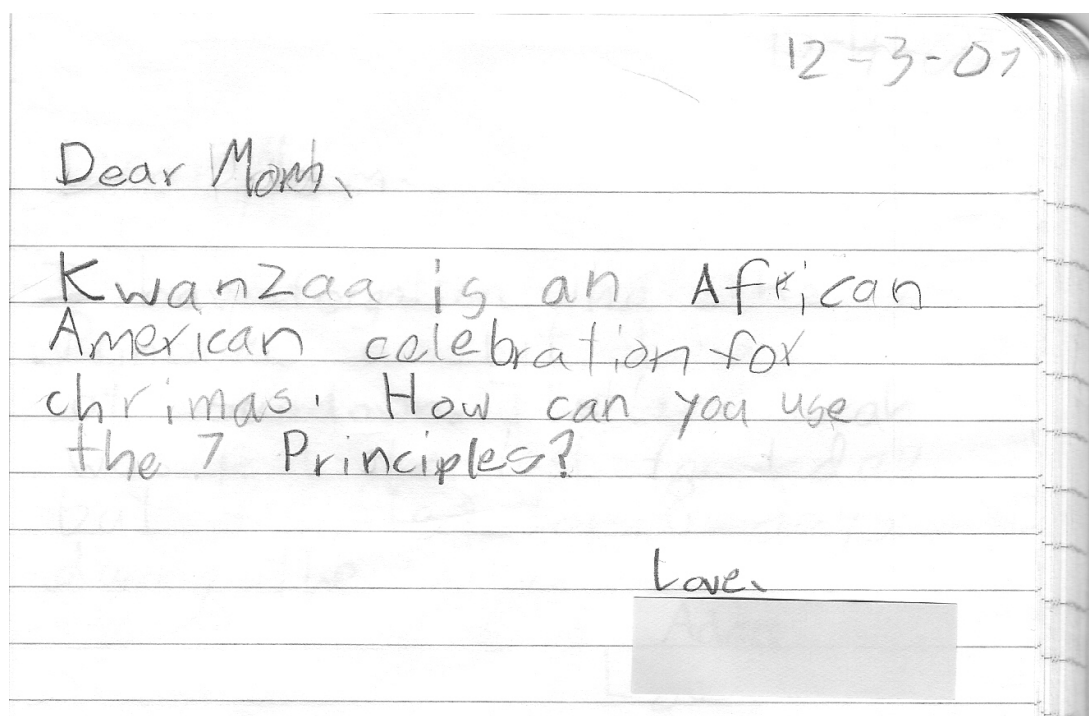


Figure 32. Better formatting by December for Alan.

As the journal project progressed, Alan improved even more as he added details to his entries. Notice in the next example (Figure 33) how Alan explained the pilot testing program in which our school was chosen to participate. His formatting has improved, with the date in the correct place (and finally, the correct date!), as well as correct punctuation after the greeting. Alan tried out new vocabulary in the word “congenial” and explained in a postscript the meaning of “pilot,” just in case Dad was not sure.

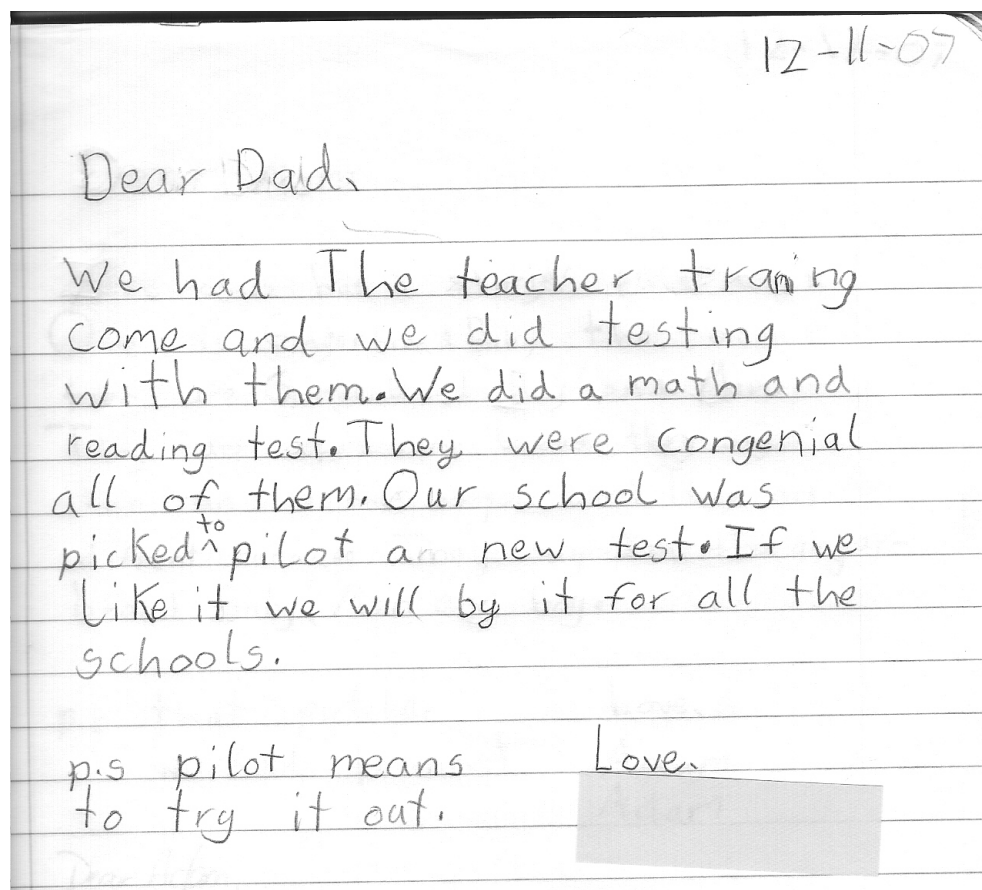


Figure 33. Alan's organization of ideas improved even more in this December entry.

Domain 4: Style

The Style Domain assesses elements such as audience awareness and author's voice. At first, Alan's entries were mechanical, merely repeating teacher explanations of concepts verbatim. Even though the organization and presentation of ideas were appropriate for the entry, they had very little personality of their own. However, as Alan became more comfortable with the Family Message Journals and enjoyed the experience, his personality came through. He has a wry wit and dry sense of humor that is charmingly understated. In Figure 34 Alan lists the four kinds of sentences and quips, "They are all fantasy [sic] words you know." And, as in another student's featured entry,

we are again alerted, by way of a postscript, to a fellow classmate's flatulence issue.

Included in this example is Alan's dad's response. It is apparent where Alan gets his sense of humor.

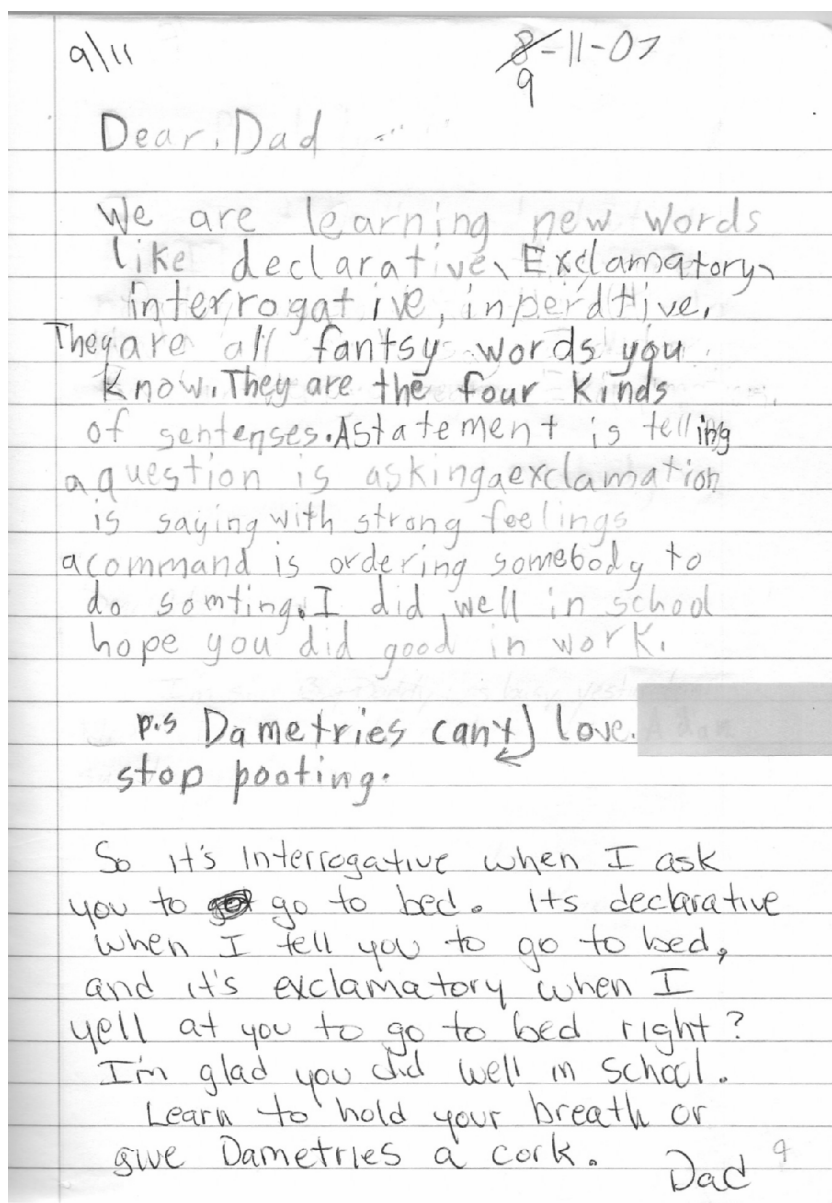


Figure 34. Alan's author's voice comes through in this September entry.

Audience awareness was one of Alan's greatest strengths. The presence of an authentic audience is the characteristic that sets Family Message Journals apart from most all other journals. Alan made the most of this element, as he really played to his audience. Throughout the Family Message Journal project, Alan wrote to his mom, dad, aunt, grandmother, and grandfather. He altered the nature of his entries for each of these recipients. The entry in Figure 35 was to his Aunt Shannon, in which he told her, "I wan't [sic] to go easy on you."

10/11

Dear, Shannan

We are learning about Missing addends. Here is an example $\begin{array}{r} 11 \\ - 39 \\ \hline 02 \end{array}$

$41 + 39 = 2$ I know that was short I usaly I right longer but I wan't to go easy on you.

Love, [Redacted]

Figure 35. Alan's audience awareness is apparent in this note to his aunt.

Summary

Alan's primary weakness was run-on sentences. Spelling was not a major concern. He spelled the majority of third grade level words correctly, and those misspelled were above grade level. Alan enjoyed learning new vocabulary words and

often used them appropriately in the correct context. He had few problems with capitalization or punctuation. He tended to make errors in capitalization by not capitalizing proper nouns or capitalizing nouns that he thought should be proper nouns. Punctuation mistakes were primarily those associated with run-on sentence errors.

In her interview, Alan's mom said she thought her son had gained knowledge about how to put his ideas on paper. She said he had also become a better speller and his penmanship had improved. Alan agreed, and added that he liked that he learned how to add more details to his entries. He also thought it was "cool" that he could actually look at his entries at the beginning and at the end of the project and see his improvement.

Alan consistently organized his entries nicely. Clarity was a slight issue early but had improved by the end of the project. While his format began better than most of his classmates, it did not appear to improve drastically as time went on. He was able to correctly punctuate the greeting and closing, but indenting never became a habit with Alan.

Along with organization of ideas, another of Alan's strengths was the Style Domain, featuring author's voice and audience awareness. Alan shares his dad's sense of humor, and this personality trait was portrayed nicely in Alan's entries. His teasing banter with various recipients, from his parents to his aunt and grandparents, alluded to an awareness of his audience and gave life to his entries.

Kimberly, Case #4

Kimberly's first and final entries are displayed in Figures 36 and 37.

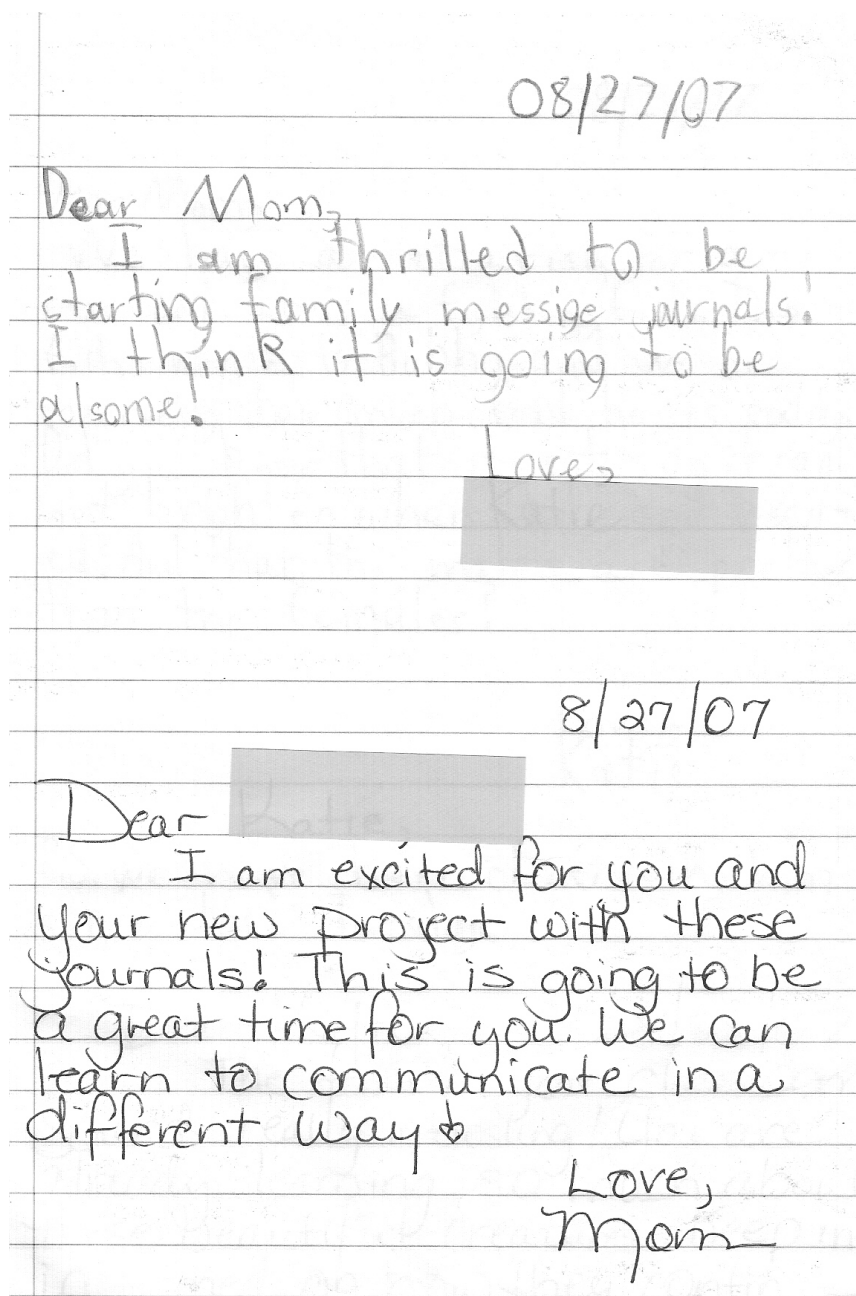


Figure 36. Kimberly's first entry with parent response in late August.

and because the witch was smelly and ugly, the gingerbread princess ran away. She runs all the way up the mountain and sees the prince hunting and when she saw him he saw her he picked her up and almost fed her to the animals but before that could happen she hopped out of his hand slid down the animal's backs and went into the palace. As soon as she thinks she's safe she bumps into the queen. The queen picks her up and almost eats her but the gingerbread princess yells "STOP!" As soon as she said that the queen doped her and the gingerbread princess ran again. As she running she runs into the king as he almost steps on her he stops moves his foot and finds the gingerbread princess. He picks her up too but takes her to the potion room. He puts her down on the table, mixed something up and pours it

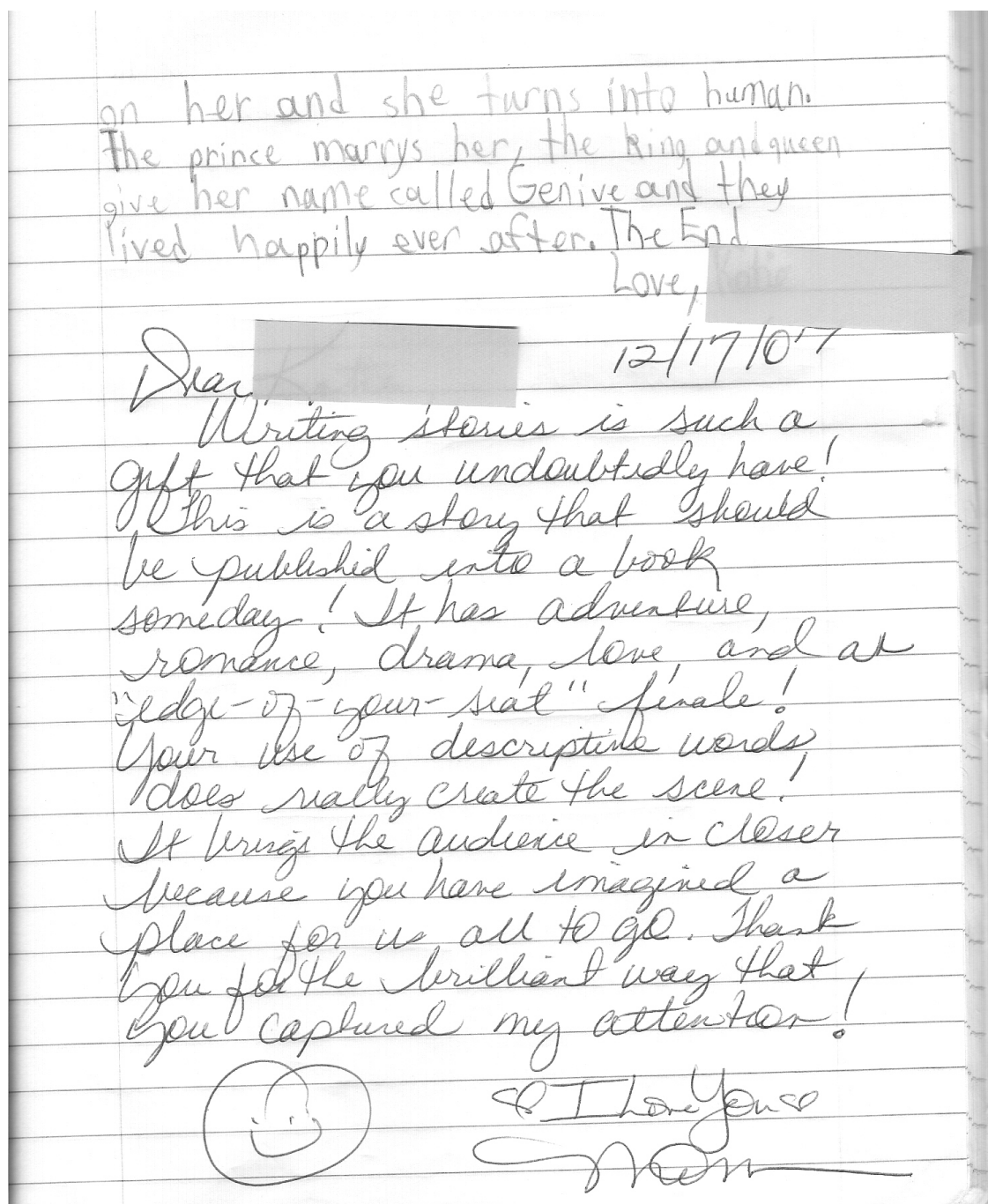


Figure 37. Kimberly's final entry with parent response in December.

Table 7 illustrates Kimberly's weekly performance on basic mechanics, as well as the number of sentences, characters per word and words per sentence. Each weekly entry was also word processed into Microsoft Word 2007 in order to obtain a grade equivalent of the entry.

Table 7

Kimberly's Family Message Journal Weekly Conventions Data.

Week	# of Sent	# of Words	Spell Err %	Cap. Err%	Punct. Err %	Grade Equiv	Char/ Word	Words/ Sent
1	8	73	3	3	0	2.9	3.7	8.5
2	10	67	3	0	0	1.8	3.8	6.2
3	19	142	7	2	1	4.6	4.3	7.3
4	6	69	1	1	0	2.7	3.6	10.8
5	9	54	4	0	0	2.1	4.0	5.5
6	7	48	4	0	0	2.8	3.6	6.2
7	9	70	0	0	0	3.2	3.8	7.1
8	3	42	7	0	0	6.1	4.6	12.6
9	7	63	8	0	0	5.8	5.0	8.4
10	11	109	4	0	0	4.7	4.1	9.5
11	4	48	0	0	0	4.5	3.4	11.0
12	7	90	4	0	0	5.3	4.0	12.2
13	5	56	2	0	0	3.2	4.1	10.4
14	15	192	2	1	2	4.1	4.0	12.4
15	8	73	5	0	0	6.3	4.9	8.3
16	7	97	2	0	0	5.0	4.0	13.0

Domain 1: Conventions

The Conventions Domain scores sentence formation, usage, and mechanics. During the first month of Family Message Journals, choosing one entry per week, Kimberly scored an average writing grade equivalent of 3.0. During the last four weeks, again choosing one entry a week, Kimberly's average writing grade equivalent was 4.7. This gain is average, and I would have expected Kimberly to begin with a higher grade equivalent than 3.0. Consequently, I would have expected a higher final result.

Regarding usage and mechanics, Kimberly was nearly flawless. Twelve of her 16 samples contained no capitalization or punctuation errors at all. The remaining four only contained one or two errors. This result is especially admirable since Kimberly correctly used dialogue in her stories to lend voices to her colorful characters. Figure 38 illustrates Kimberly's use of dialogue in her writing.

1/28/07

Dear Mom and Dad,

We're going to have a sub tomorrow and Mrs. McCann wanted us to make up a story called "My Substitute is an Alien!" This might be funny, guess who it's going to be Mr. Coker! So here's my story. Once in a far away planet called Glo lived a lot of green glowing gross aliens. One day, one alien thought "Maybe I should go check out some other planets." So he put on his protective suit (which by the way looked like human) and set off to go to a place called Earth. He landed near a school named Mulberry Creek Elementary. He walked in and some people rushed toward him and asked him to substitute he said yes because he wanted to try anything. So they took him to Mrs. McCann's classroom and left him there. He saw other aliens (which by the way were humans) and said "I think I'm safe." And he took off his protective suit and all the students screamed. He said "WHAT?" and one of the students yelled "YOUR'RE AN ALIEN!" And that's the end. P.S. Both of you

Love, write!
Katie

Figure 38. Kimberly's use of dialogue.

Domain 2: Ideas

The Ideas Domain addresses elements such as clarity, focus, and development of ideas. As expected, Kimberly was strong in this domain. The frequent practice of her writing skills allowed Kimberly to improve her craft. Figure 39 is an early entry in which there are slight clarity issues. Kimberly was explaining the death of our class fish. Her last sentence makes little sense, even within the context of the rest of the paragraph.

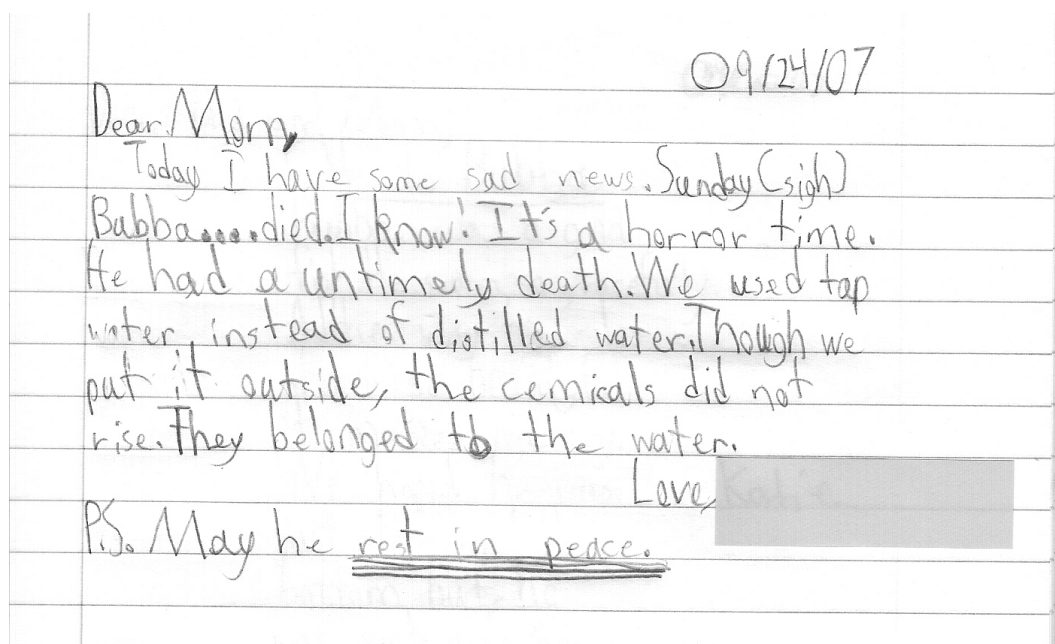


Figure 39. Kimberly had slight clarity problems in this September entry.

By December, Kimberly had improved her use of supporting details and her generous use of adjectives helped improve clarity. Figure 40 illustrates Kimberly's use of new vocabulary words: smug, boastful, and irate.

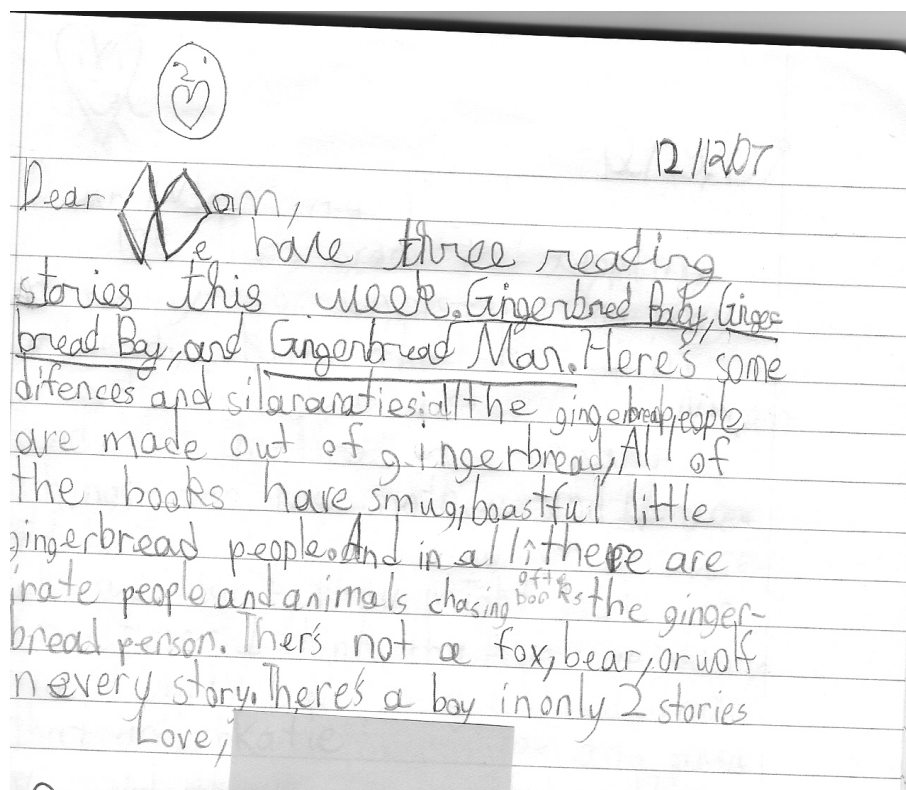


Figure 40. Katie's December entry shows improvement with supporting details vocabulary, enhancing clarity.

Domain 3: Organization

The Organization Domain looks for format and grouping of ideas. Kimberly, more than any other student, stayed on topic and correctly used paragraphs when changing topics. Figure 41 illustrates Kimberly's correct use of format, grouping of ideas, and transitions. Kimberly was able to accomplish these tasks even at the beginning of the Family Message Journal project and continued to refine her skill as she practiced daily.

10/31/07

Dear Dad,

Today we learned about rocks. I know it doesn't sound very interesting but it is. We learned about the three different types of rocks. Like metamorphic, igneous, and sedimentary. Metamorphic ^{rocks} can be changed by heat and pressure. Igneous rocks are made from magma that cooled and hardened. And sedimentary is made from different minerals that were squeezed together.

Love,
Katie

Figure 41. Katie excelled in elements of format, grouping of ideas, and transitions.

Domain 4: Style

The Style Domain assesses the elements of audience awareness and author's voice. As one or both of Kimberly's parents responded every evening, she was acutely aware that she had a captive audience. In Figure 42, Kimberly used her mom's nurturing personality to her advantage. Her mom's reply is proof that Kimberly knew her audience well.

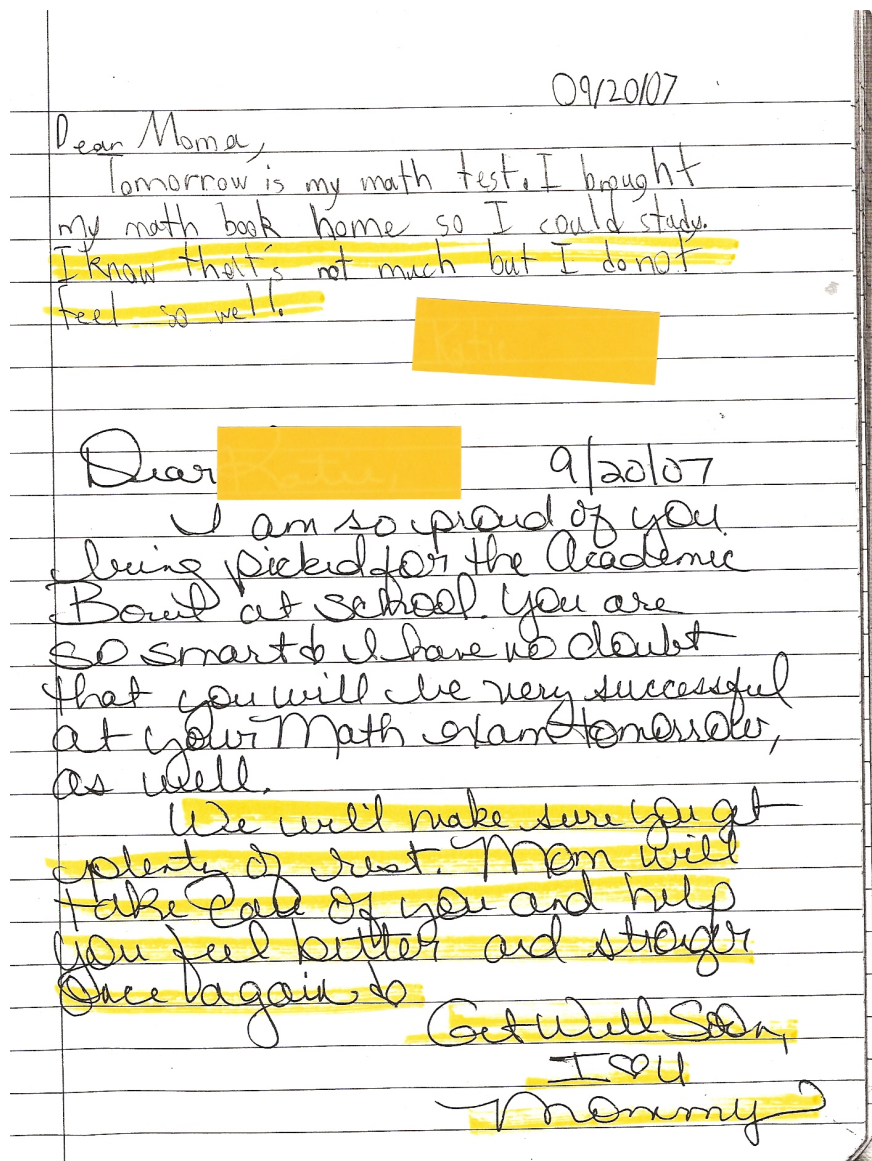


Figure 42. Kimberly was acutely aware of her audience.

Author's voice comes naturally for Kimberly. A member of the Gifted and Talented class, she is both creative and dramatic. She is extremely self-assured, as demonstrated in her closing above, "Your Smart, Kimberly." Figure 33 is an example of Kimberly's dramatic side. Notice the "(sigh)" included for her dramatic pause. She

sounds distraught, though possibly in parody, when she moans, “Bubba...died. I know!

It’s a horror time. He had a untimely death.”

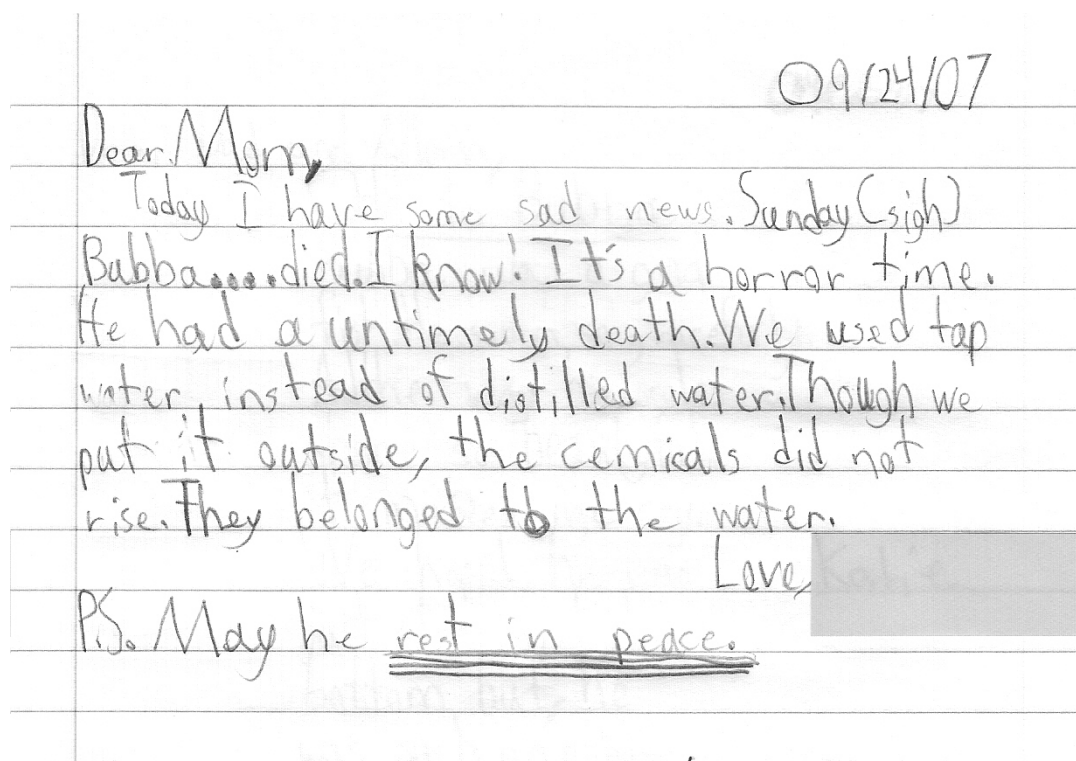


Figure 43. Kimberly is proficient at creating her own style.

Summary

Kimberly is a gifted student, ambitious and eager to please. Regarding Conventions, she is nearly flawless. Punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors are almost nonexistent.

Kimberly is creative and enjoys using her vivid imagination to create stories. Her use of details added to the clarity of her work. She improved on focus and development of ideas as the Family Message Journal project progressed. Kimberly’s mom noticed,

“She increased with higher order thinking skills. She would talk about things we completely didn’t understand and we completely didn’t!”

Organization was a strength of Kimberly’s. Her format was correct even at the beginning of the project. She was proficient at grouping her ideas and knew when to transition to a new paragraph. In these areas, she was leagues ahead of her peers.

The Style Domain is where Kimberly shines most. She was keenly aware of her audience and enjoyed the captive attention she garnered from her parents with Family Message Journals. Kimberly’s dramatic style was displayed in her journal entries. She learned that certain vocabulary evoked certain emotions for her audience.

In her interview, Kimberly’s mom was clearly proud of her daughter’s progress.

Stuff she’s learning now is material I know I didn’t do until fifth or middle school. I noticed a distinct improvement in her creativity. As it went on, she wrote fantasy type stories that blew me away. I know I am biased, but some of these stories I’m thinking they should be published! (From an interview with Kimberly’s mom, February 8, 2008)

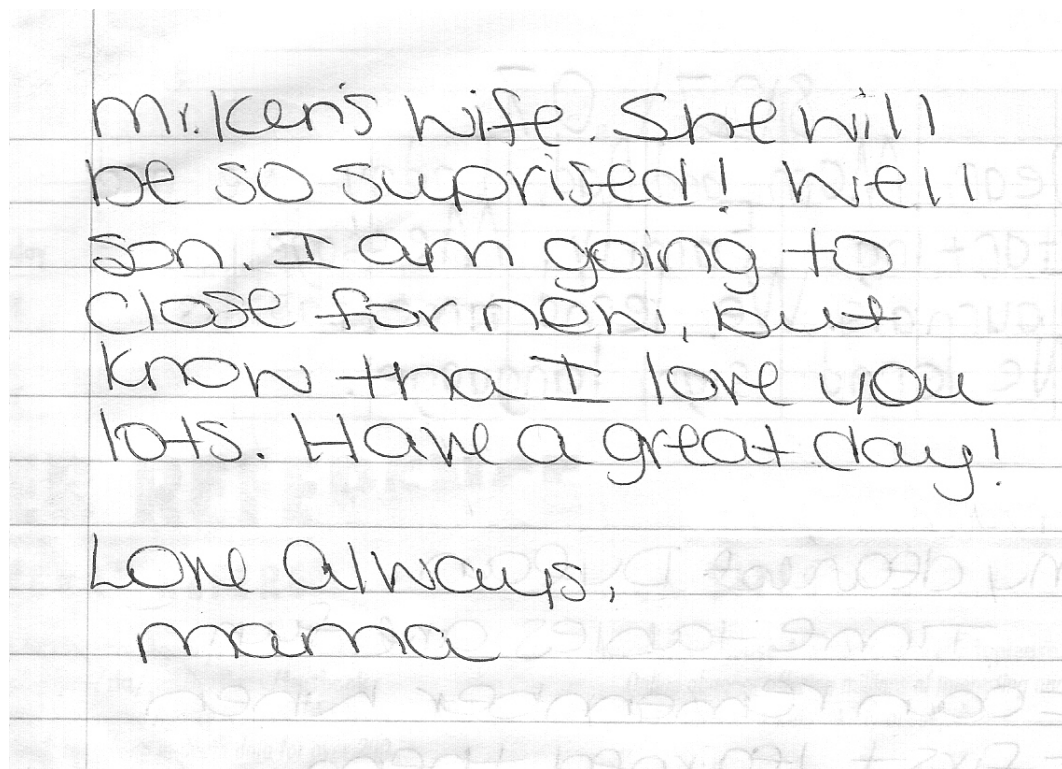
Kimberly noticed her vocabulary improvement as well. In her own interview, she said, “Now, when I write paragraphs and stuff, I won’t use the word ‘happy’ anymore. I use ‘ebullient’ or another word that means happy.”

Dalton, Case #5

Dalton's first and final entries are illustrated in Figures 44 and 45.

8/27/07
 Dear Mom and Dad, Today we are
 starting Family Message
 Journals. We learn time tables.
 We learn sign language.

my dearest [redacted]
 Time tables are fun.
 I can remember when
 I first learned them.
 My grandma ~~and~~
~~and~~ (papa's mama)
 helped me. I think
 learning sign language
 is so cool! ~~and~~
~~and~~ Mr. Ken's wife, from
 mama's work, is deaf.
 And she and Ken use
 Sign language to talk to
 each other. It is really
 cool to watch them. You
 will have to teach me some
 words so mama can go
 to work and talk to



Mr. Ken's wife. She will
be so suprised! Well I
son. I am going to
close for now, but
know tha I love you
lots. Have a great day!

Love Always,
mama

Figure 44. Dalton's first entry with his mom's response August 27, 2007.

Dear Mom

I can I can. Oh can
 you said the elf. The
 elf ran and ran. Then
 he came to the
 abominable snow man. The abominable
 snow man said I want to
 eat you. And the gingerbread
 santa said I ran away
 from Mrs. Claus and a elf.
 And I can run away
 from you to I can I
 can. Oh can you. He ran
 and ran. And the ginger-
 bread santa said run run
 as fast as you can
 can't catch me I'm
 the gingerbread santa.
 He was so festive that
 he was fast. Then Santa
 smeld hem. Then sou hem
 Santa said were are
 you going said Santa.
 The gingerbread santa said
 I ran away from

Mrs. Claus an elf the
 abamal snow man. Oh can
 you said santa. Santa ran and
 ran. The gingerbread santa
 said run run as fast as
 you can can't catch
 me I'm the gingerbread
 santa. The End. Did you like
 it hope you did. Well got
 to go.

Love

That sounds like
 a great story. I did
 enjoy it very much. Have
 a great day.

Love you bunches.
 Mama

Figure 45. Dalton's final entry in December.

Domain 1: Conventions

Table 8 shows Dalton's weekly performance on basic mechanics, as well as the number of sentences, characters per word and words per sentence.

Table 8

Dalton's Family Message Journal Weekly Conventions Data.

Week	# of Sent	# of Words	Spell Err %	Cap. Err%	Punct. Err %	Grade Equiv	Char/ Word	Words/ Sent
1	3	19	16	0	5	3.0	4.6	6.3
2	5	39	5	5	8	2.3	5.3	7.8
3	19	90	9	3	6	4.2	3.5	8.0
4	3	32	13	9	6	1.2	3.5	8.0
5	3	21	14	14	10	3.0	4.2	4.6
6	2	29	10	10	7	4.4	3.9	6.0
7	2	28	21	11	7	2.1	3.6	11.0
8	4	30	13	10	3	2.8	3.8	6.5
9	11	43	9	0	5	2.5	4.4	3.7
10	9	45	2*	4	11	0.3	3.5	4.3
11	11	83	17	6	5	1.8	4.1	6.8
12	8	60	3	2	10	1.9	4.9	7.0
13	5	41	17	0	5	3.9	4.9	7.0
14	4	34	9	0	9	6.8*	4.6	8.5
15	3	29	17	0	10	3.6	3.8	9.6
16	40	289	8	6	9	1.6	3.6	7.0

Note: The grade equivalents in Weeks 3 and 13 are skewed due to unusually long words associated with the particular entry. See discussion below.

The Week 3 entry, explaining the four kinds of sentences, includes the multisyllabic words: *interrogative*, *imperative*, *declarative* and *exclamatory*. These words are not normally in Dalton's vocabulary. Similarly, Week 13 contains *Hanukkah* and *celebrated*. The spelling error percentage and the grade equivalent in Week 10 are skewed unusually low for this student due to the extremely simplistic vocabulary used in the entry.

Each weekly entry was word processed into Microsoft Word 2007 in order to obtain a grade equivalent of the entry as shown in the data above. During the first month of Family Message Journals, choosing one entry per week, Dalton's average writing grade equivalent was 2.7. During the last 4 weeks, choosing one entry per week, Dalton's average grade level equivalent was 4.0. Considering Dalton's persistent Conventions errors and lack of detail (discussed in Domain 2), this gain is significant.

The Conventions Domain focuses on mechanics, usage, and sentence formation. Mechanics was a major problem throughout Dalton's Family Message Journal entries. Spelling was the most prominent weakness. The average percentage of spelling errors across the 16 week project was 11%. Spelling errors capped at 21% in Week 7. Week 10 was actually the best entry for spelling, with only 2% of spelling errors, but the vocabulary in this entry was so simplistic that it only rated a 0.3 writing grade equivalent.

The significance of Dalton's spelling errors is that many of his misspellings are words on the third grade level or lower. For example, words such as *people*, *because*, *upon*, *were*, *where*, *now table*, and *learned* are well below the third grade level and

should not present a spelling issue. Additionally, Dalton's spelling ability did not seem to improve as the Family Message Journal project progressed.

The example entry in Figure 46 demonstrates Dalton's spelling mistakes with common words such as *there* that should be a part of his everyday repertoire. In addition, four of the misspelled words, *mantle*, *inner core*, *outer core*, and *Earth*, were newly learned vocabulary words and were on the board for all to see and copy.

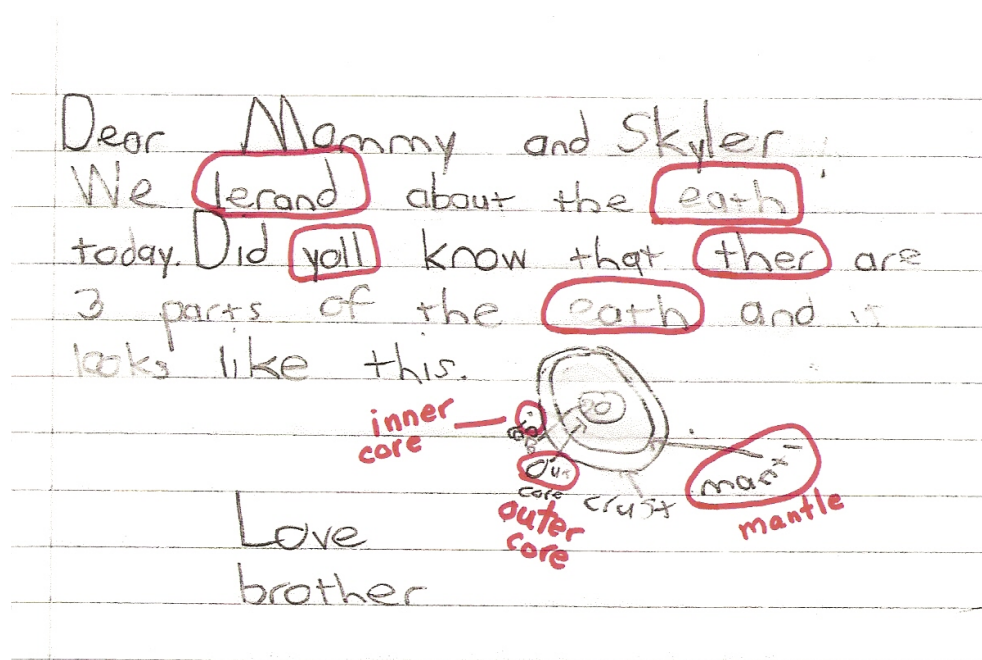


Figure 46. Dalton's spelling errors in Week 7.

Capitalization and punctuation were not significant problems for Dalton. There was a recurring error in his closing and signature, in which he did not capitalize Pumpkin Pie, his mom's nickname for him. He often omitted the comma after his closing. There was also the occasional run-on sentence lacking appropriate punctuation.

Usage errors were rampant in Dalton's writing. There were several problems with subject/verb agreement. Noun forms (singular, plural, and possessive) were frequently incorrect. Words that should be plural were often missing their plural endings (s, es, ies). Dalton added apostrophes when there was no possession, yet omitted apostrophes in other instances where they were needed. He also seemed confused as to when to use *a* and when to use *an*. Homophones *to* and *too*, as well as *they're*, *there* and *their* were used interchangeably.

Sentence formation errors were common in Dalton's entries. Run-on sentences were few, but there were frequent fragments. Clarity was an issue when Dalton left out key words, such as the articles *a*, *an*, and *the*. Sometimes he left out the verb in a sentence. There were sporadic entries where he went back and added a word he had omitted, but in general, it was apparent that Dalton did not self-edit. Figure 47 is a typical entry illustrating Dalton's most frequent errors in the Conventions Domain.

Dear Mom and Dad, We
 here ^{SP} 4 kinds of sentences
 1 of the sentences ^{S/V} are a
 Statement. The fancy word
 is declarative. Here is an
 example. My dog is mean. A
 2nd ^{SP} ^{Frq} is a question. The fancy
 word is interrogative. Here is an
 example What are you doing?
 We also here ^{SP} another ^{SP} 3
 it is a command. The
 fancy word is imperative. Here
 is an example Go home. We
 also here ^{SP} another ^{SP} is a ^{SP} 4th
 exclamation. The fancy word
 is exclamatory. Here is an
 example Oh!
 Love you
 pumpkin pie

Figure 47. Dalton's Week 3 entry illustrates typical errors in the Conventions Domain.

Domain 2: Ideas

The Ideas Domain looks for elements such as clarity, focus, and development of ideas. Throughout his Family Message Journal, Dalton gave little detail for his reader. He introduced the topic he was supposed to be explaining to his mom, but did a poor job of developing his ideas.

Dear Mom and Dad We
 learned about subjects and
 predicates. here is one.
My cat ran away.

my dearest Dylan
 That will be fun
 learning! This will help
 you know more what the
 sentence is about. you are
 defining the sentence.
 You will know who or
 what the sentence is
 about and what happened.
 This will be easy for you
 I think. well, I will
 go for now so I can
 get ready for bed. I will
 write again real soon. ☺
 Love bunches,
 nanna

Figure 48. Dalton's September 18 entry displays deficiencies in Domain 2.

The September 18 entry, Figure 48, shows Dalton did little more than repeat the assigned topic for the entry. This entry's lack of development, supporting details, and clarity are well below where Dalton should be academically.

By December, Dalton had no noticeable improvement in the Ideas Domain. His entries were longer, but the length merely seemed to stretch out the lack of clarity even further, causing more confusion for the reader. This December 12 entry (Figure 49), toward the end of the project, displays Dalton's lack of improvement.

Dear P-Dad We
 had a group of
 people come in our
 class today. Well achuly the
 hall school. We had a
 ad and strachen. It was a
 test. I was picked to
 take it agin. And I got
 bage. Well that's all
 for know.

Love
 Dylan

Figure 49. Dalton's December entry shows little if any improvement in the Ideas Domain.

Domain 3: Organization

The Organization Domain looks for format and grouping of ideas, as well as transitions. The early entry (Figure 50) shows Dalton's date in the wrong position, no indentation to begin the body of the entry, and no closing or signature. Additionally, the grouping of ideas with no proper transitions leads the reader to wonder what exactly the class is putting on a graph.

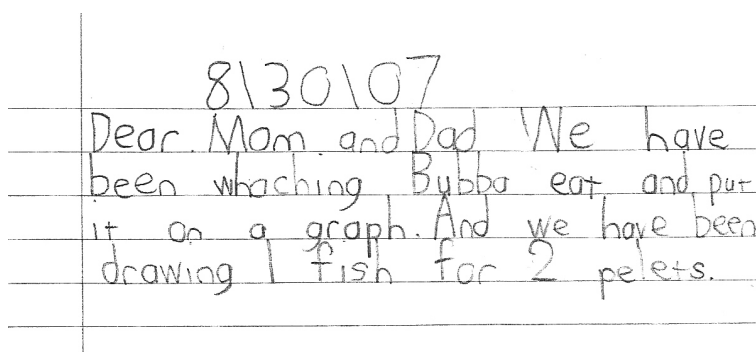


Figure 50. Lack of organization in Dalton's August 30 entry leaves the reader confused.

By the November entry, Figure 51, Dalton routinely put the date in the proper position and the greeting is on the first line. There is still no indentation for the beginning of the body of the entry, but there is a closing and signature, albeit not in the correct position with correct punctuation, but it is an improvement.

Dalton's story is lacking in imagination and creativity. However, there is a hint that Dalton is attempting to create a beginning, middle, and end to his story. There is more evidence of grouping of ideas. Also, in this entry, some transitions are used: Once apunu [sic] time, But in the end, and Well, thats all for know [sic]. In general, ideas are presented in a more chronological order than in Dalton's early entries.

Unfortunately, spelling errors are still rampant. Though Dalton is beginning to understand the need for organization, his story still lacks clarity and focus to the extent that Dalton's mom could not understand enough to be able to respond. Consequently, she answered that he would have to explain it to her later (see Figure 51).

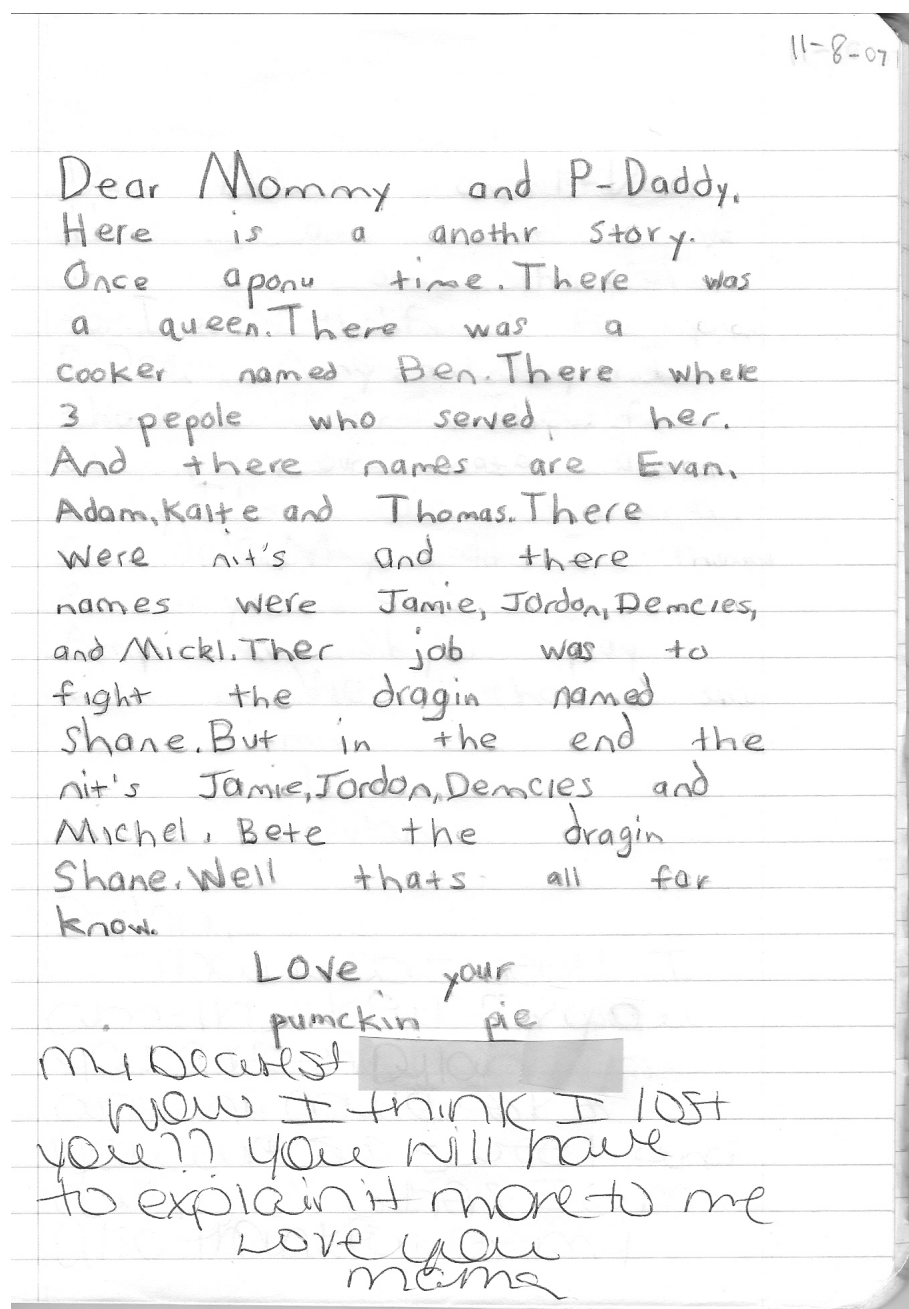


Figure 51. By November, Dalton showed improvement with organization.

Domain 4: Style

The Style Domain focuses on audience awareness and author's voice. This domain was clearly a weakness for Dalton. Because Dalton continued to use simplistic vocabulary with little description or sensory detail, his entries were left with no voice. His writing lacked creativity and imagination, and therefore seemed mechanical. Consequently, Dalton's entries appear to be written with no particular audience in mind. This lack of style is illustrated in Figure 52.

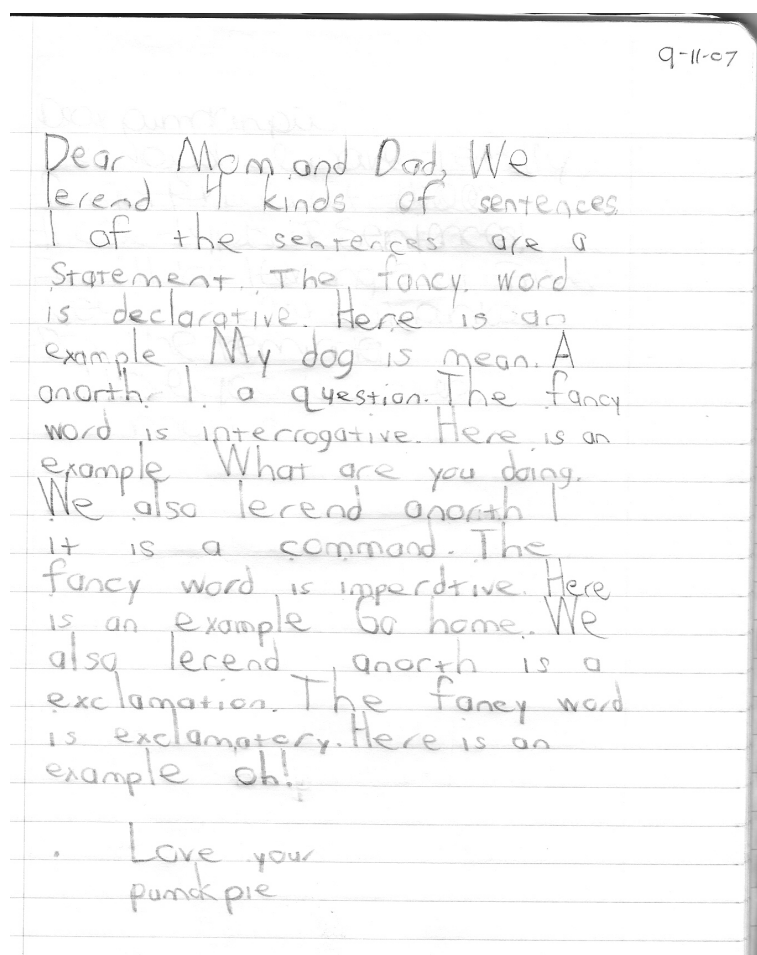
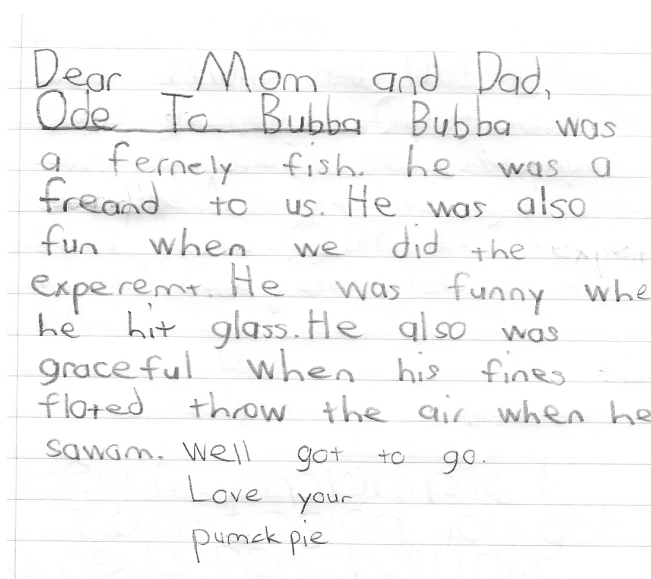


Figure 52. This September entry illustrates Dalton's weakness with style.

The September entry above explains the four kinds of sentences, gives the proper term for each, and offers an example for each kind of sentence. It is actually nicely organized, but so robotic that it has no personality. The language is simple and repetitive. There is no indication that Dalton finds his topic interesting, and no indication that he is writing to an audience at all if not for the greeting and closing.

The October example, Figure 53, shows a hint of voice, as Dalton experiments with some new vocabulary. He shows a bit of personality and audience awareness as he signs his name, “Your pumck pie [sic].”



Dear Mom and Dad,
 Ode To Bubba Bubba was
 a fernely fish. he was a
 freand to us. He was also
 fun when we did the
 experemt. He was funny whe
 he hit glass. He also was
 graceful when his fines
 floted throw the air when he
 sawam. Well got to go.
 Love your
 pumck pie

Figure 53. Dalton shows slight improvement in finding his voice.

Dalton displayed audience awareness in a November entry (Figure 54) in which he tells his mom and stepfather why he is thankful. Though his explanation is sparse, it is a step in the right direction for Dalton.

Dear Mom and P-Dad,
 Here are some things
 that I am thankful
 for. I'm thankful for you,
 P-Dad, Amy, and Skyler. I'm
 thankful for the food,
 our pets, our water and
 family. I'm also thankful
 for dada. Why am I thankful
 for it. yall cook for me
 Amy and Skyler play
 with me. Well that's all
 for know.
 Love
 [Redacted Signature]

Figure 54. By late November, Dalton shows signs of audience awareness.

Summary

Dalton's writing grade equivalent did improve from 2.7 to 4.0, but he still had quite a few problems with sentence formation, usage, and mechanics. Spelling was of particular concern, since many of Dalton's spelling mistakes were sight words for his third-grade level. Most of Dalton's writing used simplistic vocabulary in sentences that varied little in structure. This aspect of Dalton's writing did not show significant improvement from the beginning to the end of the project.

Clarity was not a strong point, as Dalton left out key transition words and even verbs. He used little supporting detail, no descriptive language, and he seldom offered the reader sufficient information to explain the topic.

Most of Dalton's writing did not include a beginning, middle or ending. There was little evidence of an organizational pattern. Only toward the end of the data collection period did Dalton show signs of arranging ideas in a meaningful order. Toward the end of the project, Dalton displayed hints of audience awareness.

In their interviews, Dalton and his parents all thought that his handwriting had improved. Dalton's mom was pleased that her son's entries had increased in length, as she stated, "Sometimes he'd get so detailed trying to say what he wanted to say."

They also noticed an increased spelling ability, but acknowledged that he still had a long way to go. Dalton expressed his need for further improvement in a serious tone:

I need to still get better in spelling and I need to try to remember where to put commas and periods and question marks. I need to know if it's like a run-on sentence. I need to try to start noticing that, especially. (Interview with Dalton, February 8, 2007)

Dalton, his mom, and his stepfather were surprised at the difference between Dalton's first and last entries. All wanted to know when Family Message Journals would resume and were looking forward to Dalton's continued progress.

Shaun, Case #6

Shaun's first and final entries are shown below, in Figures 55 and 56.

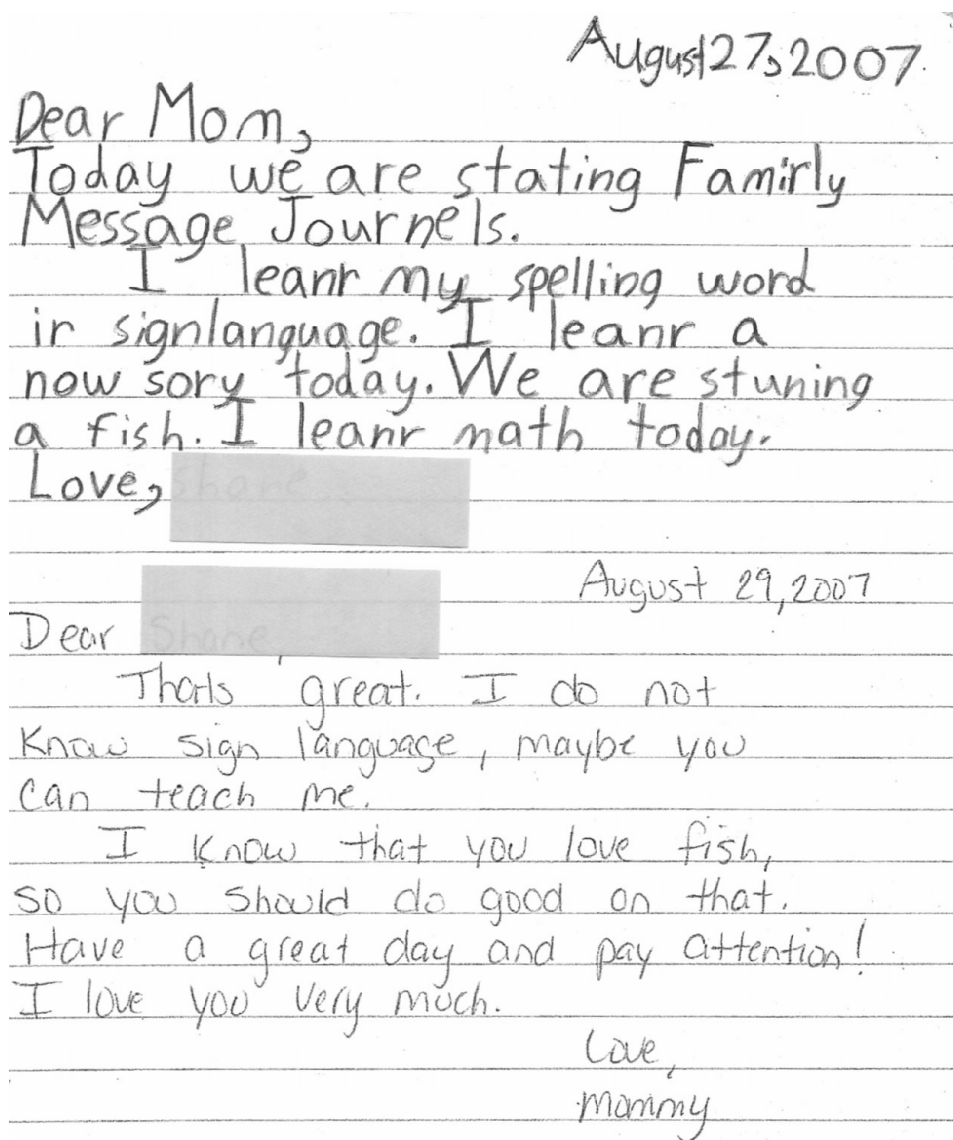


Figure 55. Shaun's first Family Message Journal entry and his mom's response.

December 18, 2007

Dear Mom,

Do you like journal? I like journal!
 They are fun. I hope you like them.
 If you don't like them then that is
 ok. I was going to riat in cursire.
 But I do not kno hall. It is bad.

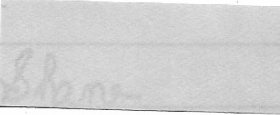
Love, 

Figure 56. Shaun's final Family Message Journal entry. He did not receive a response.

Domain 1: Conventions

Table 9 illustrates Shaun's weekly performance on basic mechanics, as well as the number of sentences, characters per word, words per sentence, and writing grade-level equivalent.

Table 9

Shaun's Family Message Journal Weekly Conventions Data

Week	# of Sent	# of Words	Spell Err %	Cap. Err%	Punct. Err %	Grade Equiv	Char/ Word	Words/ Sent
1	6	45	24	0	0	2.0	3.6	6.3
2	7	68	9	7	0	6.8*	3.6	7.4
3	6	49	18	2	0	2.8	3.6	7.0
4	5	62	19	0	0	4.5*	4.0	11.0
5	7	49	24	0	0	0.8	3.4	5.5
6	7	67	18	0	0	2.8	2.6	8.5
7	6	48	15	0	0	3.9	4.4	5.6
8	5	41	20	5	2	3.7	3.9	6.8
9	7	54	13	0	4	1.3	3.5	6.7
10	11	66	5*	0	0	2.7	4.1	5.3
11	13	101	9	0	0	1.2	3.4	7.2
12	6	48	15	0	0	0.6	3.7	6.8
13	6	42	21	0	0	2.5	4.0	5.8
14	N/A*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
15	2	20	15	0	0	1.4	2.9	6.5
16	8	47	13	0	0	0	3.2	5.0

Note: Grade equivalent for Weeks 2 and 4 are skewed high due to multisyllabic words from the specific lessons. Similarly, the spelling error percentage is skewed low because the new vocabulary words for the lesson were displayed for students to copy. Week 14, Shaun lost, then found, his journal.

Each weekly entry was word processed into Microsoft Word 2007 to obtain a grade equivalent of each entry as shown in the data above. Shaun's average writing grade equivalent for the first 4 weeks was 4.0; his average writing grade equivalent for

the last 4 weeks is 1.3. These figures can be misleading without an explanation of the skewed results in Weeks 2 and 4. As discussed earlier, Microsoft Word 2007 bases its Flesch-Kinkaid Grading Scale according to the following from the Microsoft Windows 2007 Help Desk:

This test rates text on a U.S. school grade level. For example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader can understand the document. The formula for the Flesch-Kinkaid Grade Level Score is:

$$(.39 \times \text{ASL}) + (11.8 \times \text{ASW}) - 15.59$$

Where:

ASL = average sentence length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences)

ASW = average number of syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words)

In Week 2, Shaun obtained a writing grade-level equivalent of 6.8 due to his explanation to his mom about the four types of sentences, which are *declarative*, *interrogative*, *exclamatory*, and *imperative*. Similarly, Week 4 had Shaun explaining rights and *responsibilities*. These multi-syllable words are not a part of Shaun's regular vocabulary. Additionally, all of these terms were written on the overhead projector for the class to copy correctly in their entries.

The Conventions Domain focuses on mechanics, usage, and sentence formation. Throughout the Family Message Journals, Shaun was consistent with fairly long entries compared with the rest of the class. He had average characters per word, but he had above average words per sentence.

Except for spelling, Shaun had very few errors in mechanics. Only two of Shaun's entries contained punctuation errors; only four entries had capitalization errors. He

knew when to underline book titles and where to place commas. Week 2, at 7%, was the only instance of capitalization issues.

Spelling was Shaun's downfall. His reading deficiency affects his spelling ability profoundly. His spelling improved little from the beginning of the Family Message Journal project to the final entry. Shaun's average spelling error percentage for the data collection period was 16%. More profoundly, 7 of the 15 entries had 18% or more spelling errors. Figure 57 is an example.

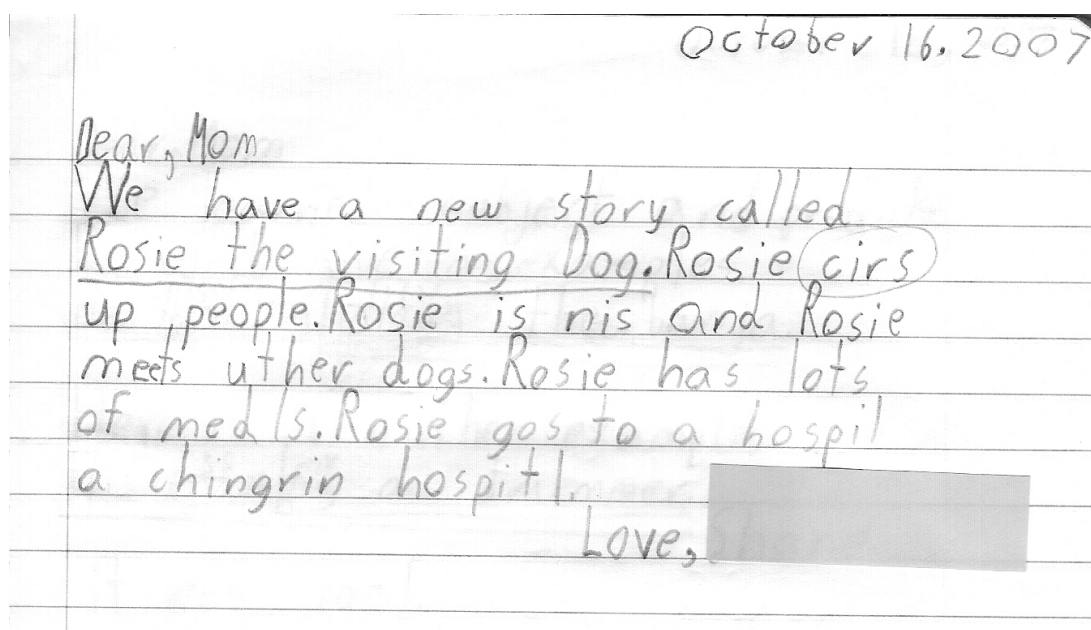


Figure 57. Shaun had difficulties with spelling. Dear, Mom We have a new story called Rosie the visiting Dog. Rosie cures up people. Rosie is nice and Rosie meets other dogs. Rosie has lots of medals. Rosie goes to a hospital a children's hospital.

In Figure 58, Shaun's mother expresses her exasperation with his continued spelling errors.

October 30, 2007

Dear Mom^{sp}

We leard Ms. McClann's trick called
 Ms. McClann's Magie^{sp} Mathematical
 Marvel. It is cool. you can vie^{sp}
^{sp}iny ^{sp} kind of math ^{sp} problem but
 it has to ~~be~~ ^{have} 0 in it. Here ~~is~~ ^{are}
 a examples ^{some}

7999	I hope you
1999	git it ok.
20000	
-15923	-80000
04077	-71384
	08616

Do you git^{sp}
 it? yes or
 'o no

LOVE,

Dear

Yes I "git it". You
 are going to start writing
 correctly. Its very hard to
 understand some of your writing!
 Wee ya.
 Man

Figure 58. Shaun's mom got frustrated with her son's lack of spelling ability.

Even toward the end of the Family Message Journal project, Shaun is still misspelling common words (see Figure 59). However, he never misses underlining the titles of stories. Notice too, that every comma is placed correctly.

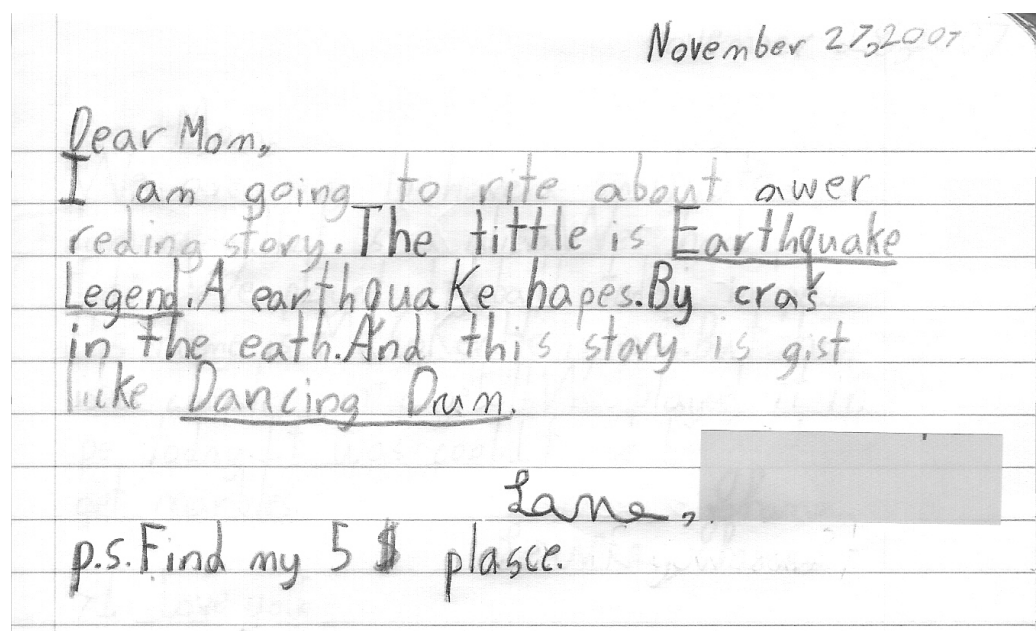


Figure 59. Shaun continued to have spelling difficulties. Dear Mom, I am going to write about our reading story. The title is Earthquake Legend. An earthquake happens. By cracks in the earth. And this story is just like Dancing Drum. Love, XXX p.s. Find my \$5 please.

Week 2, at 9% and Week 10, at 5%, show lower spelling error percentages because the vocabulary words for these entries were written for the students to copy. Week 14 displays no data because Shaun lost his journal. He did write his entries on notebook paper with the intention of placing the papers in his journal, but those papers were misplaced by the time Shaun relocated his journal.

There were some usage errors in Shaun's entries. A few entries contained subject/verb agreement problems. In some entries, he made errors with word choice. In several instances, Shaun made mistakes in noun forms (singular, plural, possessive). Word pairs most commonly confused were *four* and *for*, *now* and *know*, as well as *a* and *an*. The next entry, Figure 60, illustrates Shaun's usage errors. Like spelling errors,

Shaun's usage did not improve significantly over the course of the Family Message Journal project.

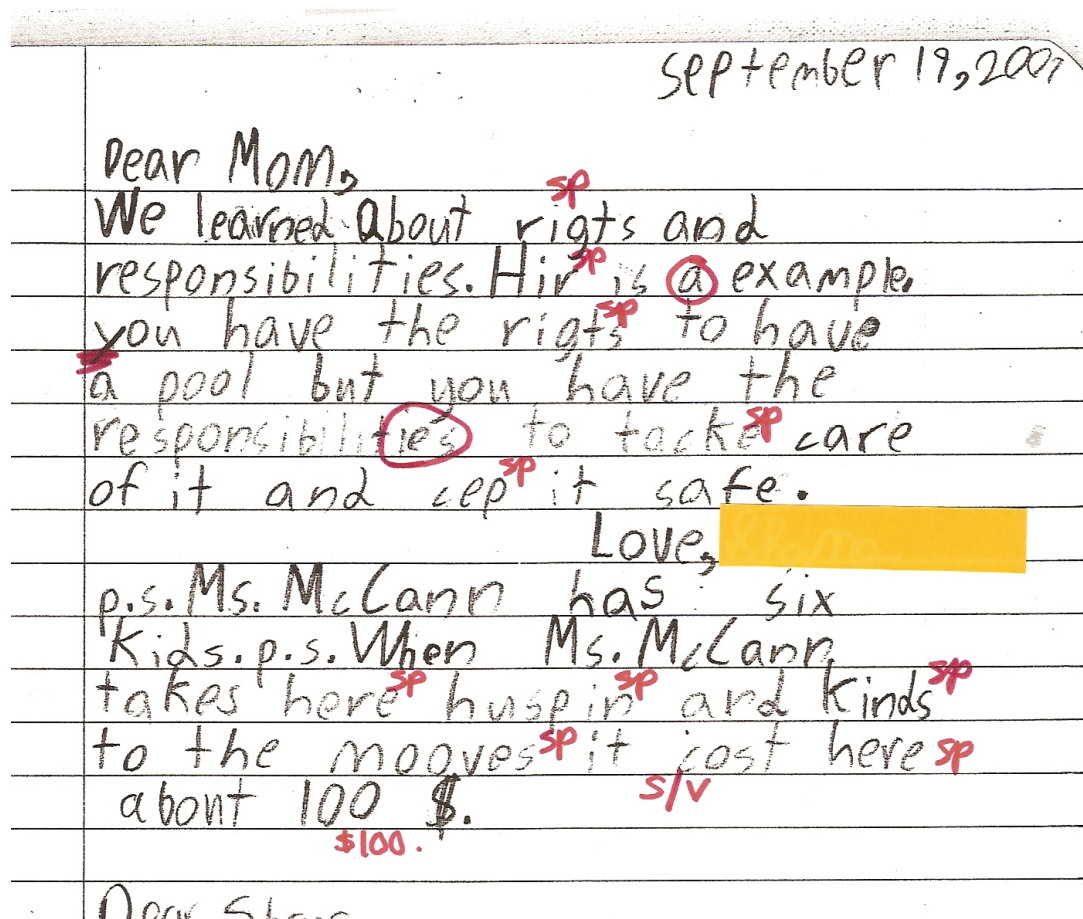


Figure 60. Shane's usage errors include noun forms, subject/verb agreement, and word choice in this September entry.

Sentence formation was sometimes an issue for Shaun. He had some problems with fragments. Most of the clarity issues were related to spelling errors. There were many entries that Shaun's mom replied that she did not understand her son's entry. Though his average words per sentence was more than many in our class, he still had

many short, choppy sentences. Little or no variation in his sentence structure made Shaun's entries less interesting for the reader. The sample entry in Figure 61 illustrates Shaun's simplistic sentence formation, which confuses the reader.

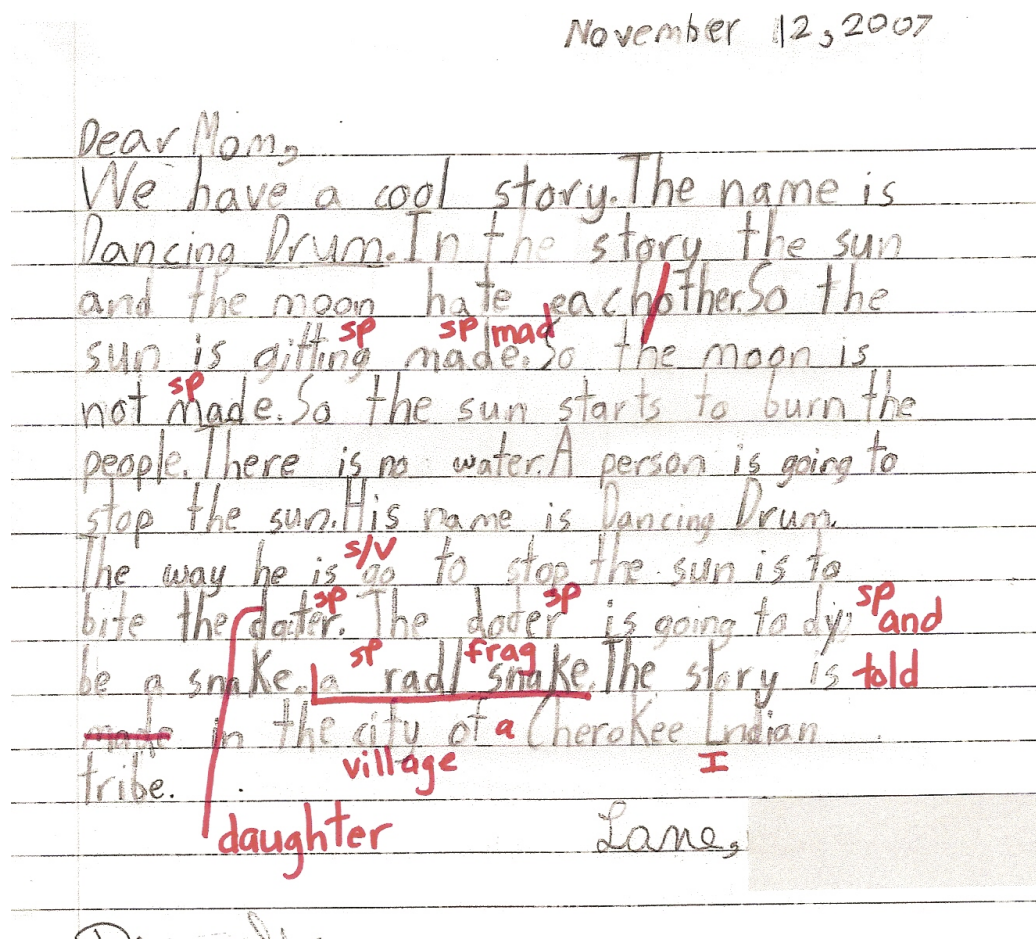


Figure 61. Shaun's November entry illustrates errors in sentence formation.

Domain 2: Ideas

The Ideas Domain assesses entries for clarity, focus, and development of ideas. Due to Shaun's significant spelling problems, clarity was an ongoing struggle. Often, Shaun's mother communicated her frustration to her son, responding that she could not understand his entries enough to comment on them. Figure 62 is an example in which Shaun is attempting to explain place value to his mother.

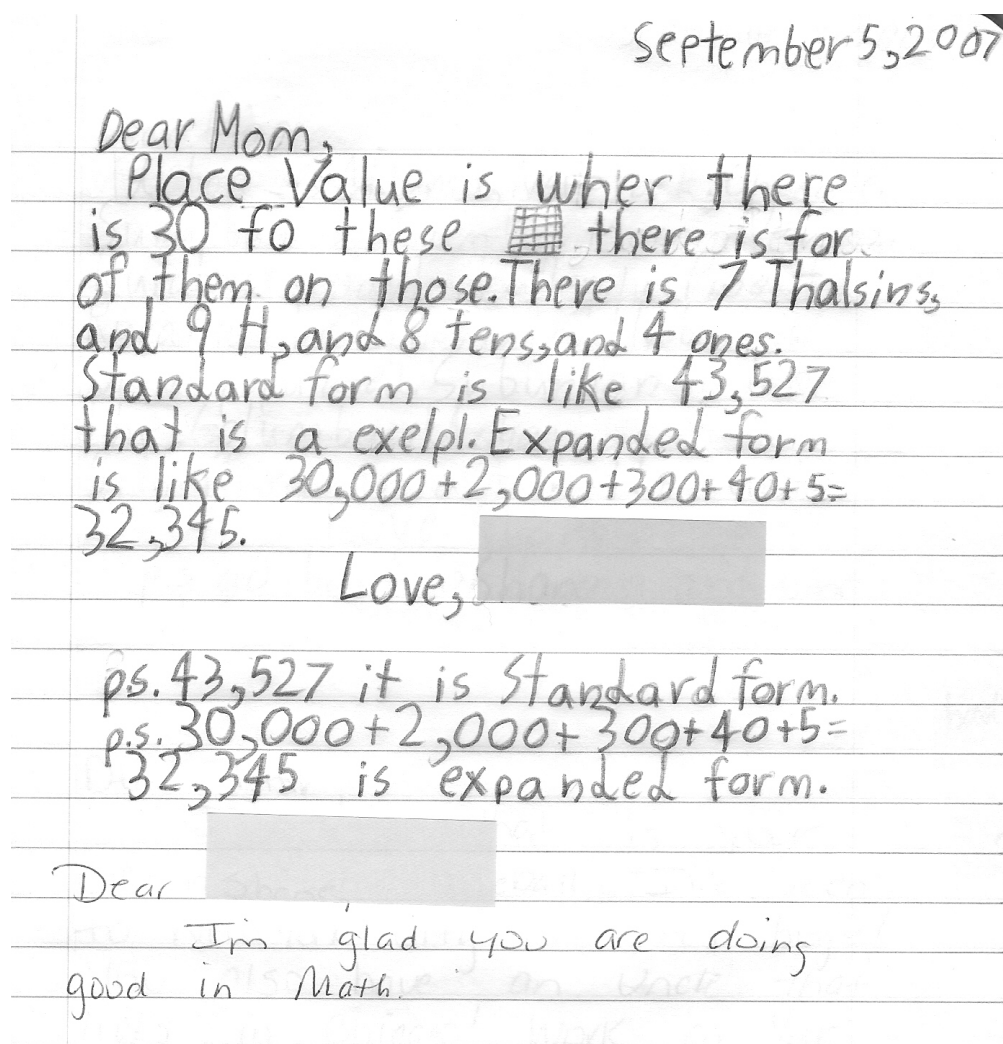


Figure 62. Shaun's mom probably gives up on this one.

Shaun's focus was generally pretty good. In the Figure 63 example, Shaun explains the three kinds of rocks. He even adds quite a bit of detail, remembering the kinds of rocks that can melt. This added information was Shaun's idea to include, obviously something he found interesting. He only wavered from the topic at the end when he told his mom that I said our pet fish was going to dress up as Spongebob for Halloween. Later, Shaun learned to use the postscript for such personal tidbits he wanted to share after the required topic was satisfied.

October 31, 2007

Dear Mom,

We learned the three kinds of rocks Metamorphic, Igneous, Sedimentary. There is five rocks that can melt. The names are slate, obsidian, breccia, pumice. These kind can inform to each other. Metamorphic Sedimentary and Igneous Sedimentary. These can inform.

Hubba Bubba is going to be spongebob for Halloween.

Love, [redacted]

Dear [redacted]

I like studying about the earth. Everyone should. We live on it. Wait till you learn about earthquakes and all that.

I hope Hubba Bubba doesn't eat to much Candy!

Love ya,
Mommy

Figure 63. Shaun was usually focused on his topic.

Shaun's development of ideas by providing supporting details was often difficult for him at first. Certainly his spelling was a hindrance at the beginning. However, I found that Shaun made more effort to add details to his writing when he was interested in the topic of the day. In the Figure 64 example, Shaun merely repeated the three branches of government. Explaining all three with details was too daunting a task for his limited spelling ability.

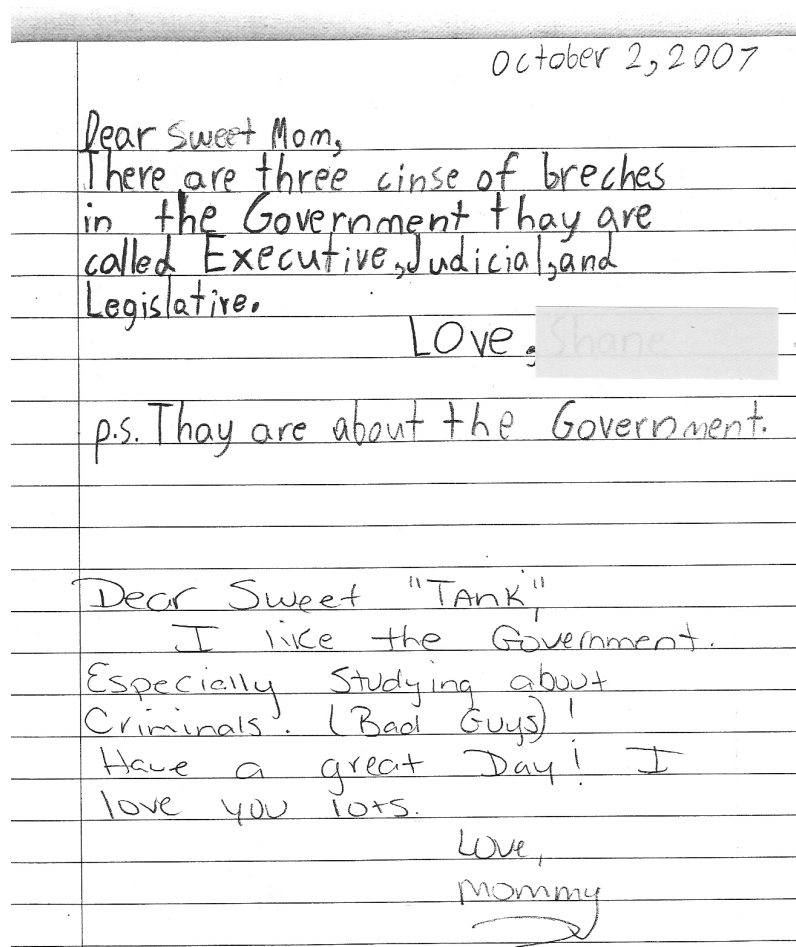


Figure 64. Shaun merely stated the topic in this entry explaining the three branches of government.

Shaun's clarity, focus, and development of ideas did improve from the beginning of Family Message Journals to the end of the project. His best entries were still the ones he found most interesting. He definitely liked the story of Balto, and was fascinated that it was a true story. He explained this story in detail. Shaun's spelling in this entry (Figure 65) is not so poor that the reader misses the point. Unfortunately, Shaun did not get a response this time.

Dear Mom,
Balto, The dog Who Saved
 Nome Balto saved this is hat
 he did it. He had to git from
 Achorage to Nome in Nome
 there were people that had
 a dses that was called
 diphtheria. If Achorage d usit
 git the medicine to nome
 all the people will daw.
 And it is troo. And it hapind
 in Alaska. In New york city
 there is a stachpo of Balto
 on a grassy hil.
 Love, [redacted]

Figure 65. By the end of Family Message Journals, Shaun had improved.

Domain 3: Organization

The Organization Domain looks for format and grouping of ideas, as well as transitions. Shaun's format never changed the entire time of data collection. From the beginning, Shaun placed the date correctly in his entries. He correctly capitalized and punctuated his greeting, closing, and signature. Shaun never indented.

Grouping of ideas is an area that Shaun struggled with at the beginning of journals, but this skill did improve as the project continued. Figure 66 shows little knowledge of grouping related ideas together.

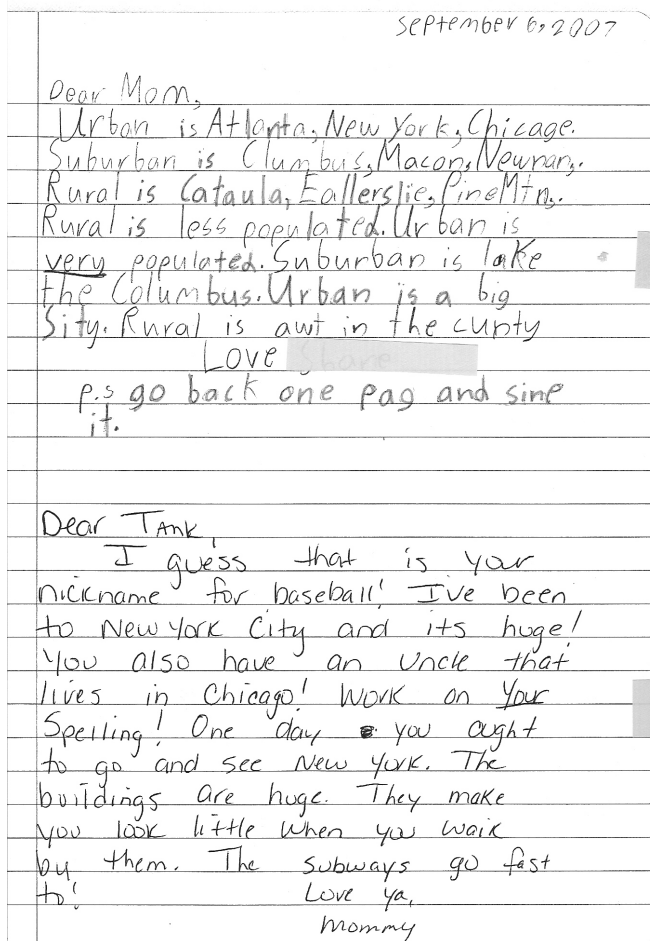


Figure 66. Shaun has difficulty with grouping of ideas.

By late November, Shaun's organization improved, as illustrated by the Figure 67 entry explaining the four kinds of sentences. Shaun gives the name of each type of sentence, then an example that he created himself. Additionally, Shaun's spelling has improved in this entry. Though not on grade level, it is understandable for the reader to be able to communicate back to him.

Dear Mom,
 There is 4 kinds of sentences.
 Statement-declarative, Question-interrogative, Command-imperative, Exclamation-exclamatory. those are fancy words. A statement sentences is like this, My dog is nice. A question sentences is like this, What is that. A command sentences is like this, Take out the chras. A exclamation is like this, We git out of school rly today "yaho".
 Love, Shaun

Figure 67. Shaun shows improvement in the Organization Domain.

Domain 4: Style

The Style Domain focuses on author's voice and audience awareness. Shaun's mother was his motivation for this element. Shaun is a very personable student with a sweet disposition. These Family Message Journals were a rare time for his mother to

focus her attention only on him. His mother kept surprising me. She would go for days and days without responding to Shaun. Each day when we went around the room for everyone to read his or her response, Shaun frequently said he gave his mom his journal and she said she would write but she forgot, or she was sick, or she was busy, or she was asleep. Each time, just when Shaun and I were about to find another respondent for him, his mother would take an evening to go backward and respond to all the nights she had missed all at once.

Shaun made the most of this attention from his mother. Due to his limited spelling ability and vocabulary development, Shaun's author's voice and audience awareness were not as developed as some, but he did improve as the Family Message Journal project progressed. (See Figure 68.)

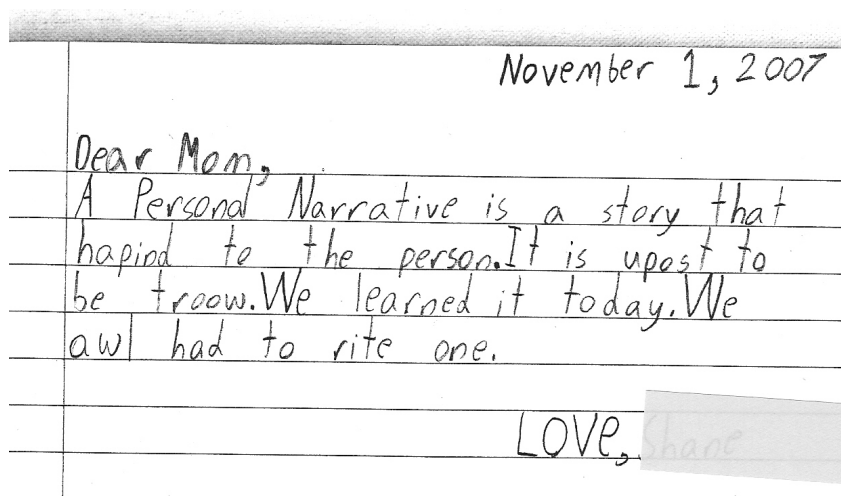


Figure 68. This early November entry illustrates weak author's voice and audience awareness.

By late November, Shaun was displaying more of his personality in his journal entries. In the Figure 69 example, students were to write a creative writing story about discovering that a substitute teacher is an alien. Shaun did *not* embrace that concept, as he only dedicated one sentence fragment to the topic. He used the remainder of his journal time to tell his mom about a day the substitute was in his P.E. class, and apparently cheated at dodge ball.

This entry is *not* an example of correct sequence or grouping of ideas. Shaun supplies bits of information that interest him at that instant. At the end, he throws in, “If we be good we get marbles.”

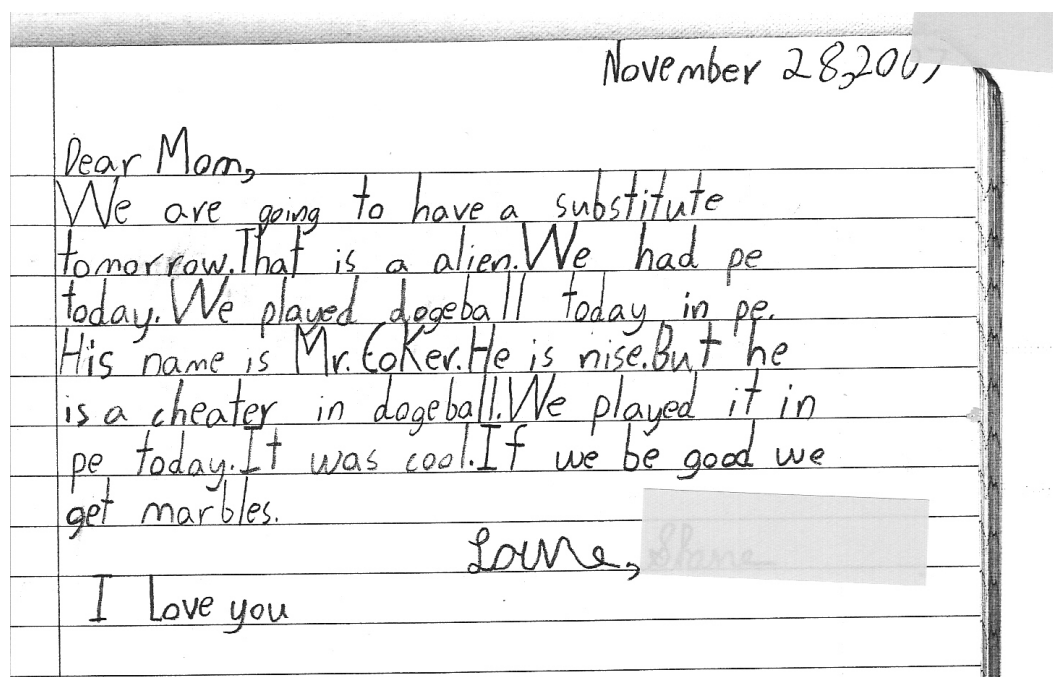


Figure 69. The late November entry shows weakness in grouping and sequencing of ideas, but it does demonstrate author's voice.

Nevertheless, this entry reflects the voice of Shaun, as the entry could easily be compared to one of the many conversations I have had with him. Topics bounce around just as swiftly in spoken conversation as well.

In Figure 70, Shaun experiments with newly learned vocabulary. I recall Shaun bringing this story to me and giggling. He was very proud that even he could use big words in his story, come up with something amusing, and allow his voice to be heard.

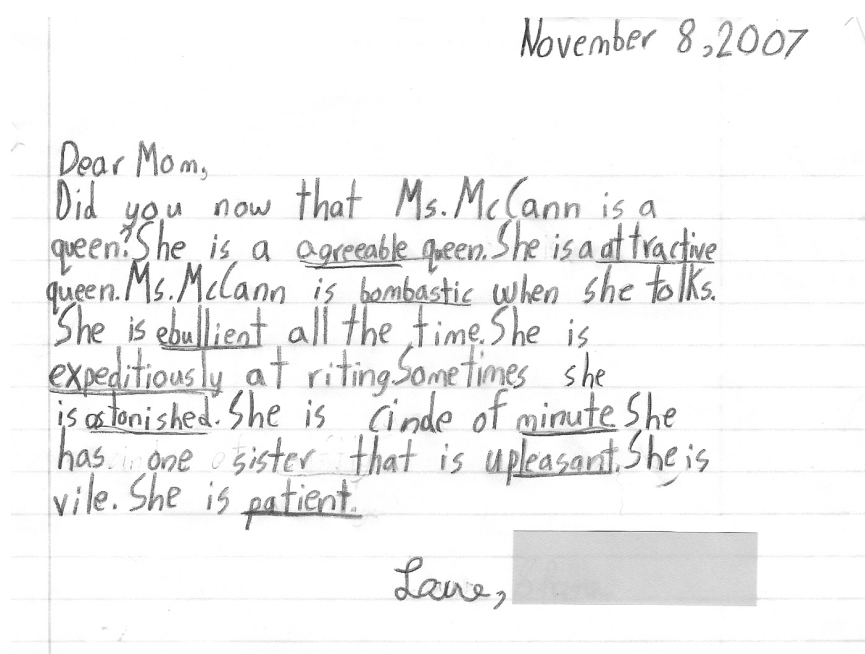


Figure 70. Shaun experiments with new vocabulary, displaying his author's voice.

Audience awareness was never a problem for Shaun. He knew exactly who his audience was, and was hungry for reciprocation. Included throughout most of his Family Message Journal entries, Shaun added notes to his mom. Notice the example (Figure 71), where Shaun added, "I love you" at the bottom of his entry.

In this entry, Shaun professes his love for his mother in all capitals. As you can see from her response, she does *not* respond in kind. Instead her emphasis is on telling him to pay attention.

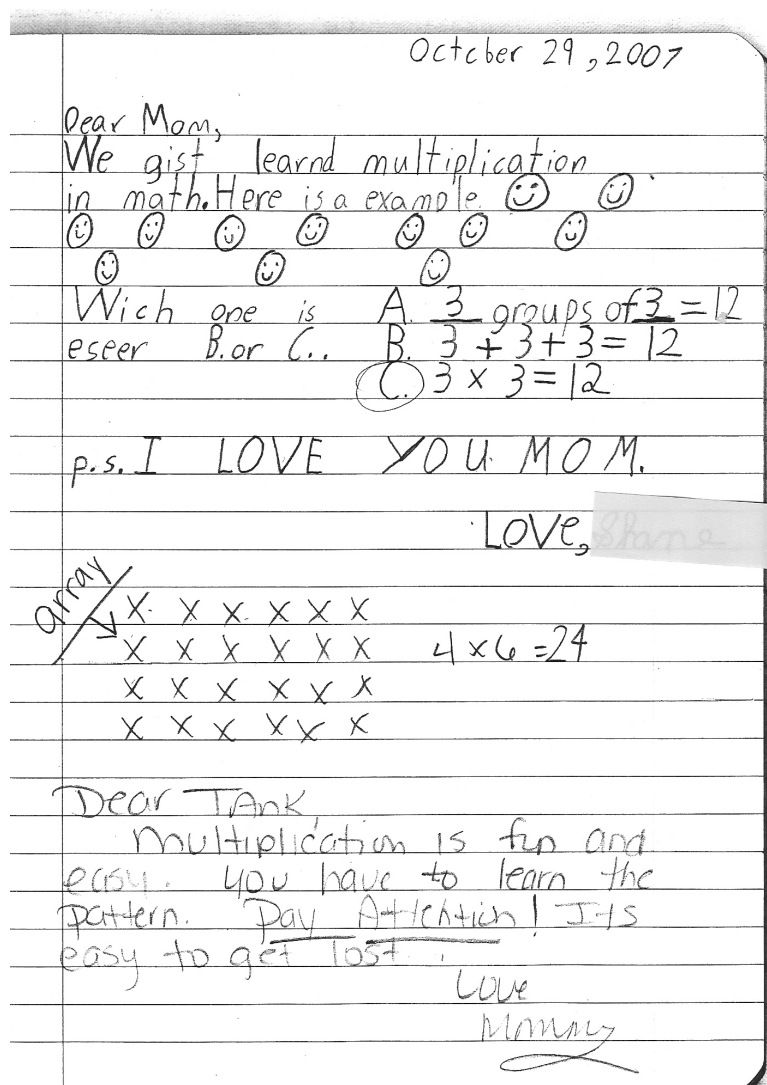


Figure 71. Shaun illustrates audience awareness with his postscript proclamation.

Summary

Shaun embraced the Family Message Journal project when most students in his shoes would have found the spelling frustration a nightmare. He only missed writing in his journal the week he lost it. Each night he encouraged his mother to write, and when she did not, Shaun was vigilant in having her catch up as soon as he could manage it.

Spelling was Shaun's nemesis. He reads on a first-grade level and his spelling coincides with this level. Shaun's spelling effects the clarity of his writing, leaving the reader confused and unable to communicate back to him.

Capitalization and punctuation are generally not a problem for Shaun. Focus was a problem sometimes, but was generally on grade level. His focus did improve when he learned to use the postscript for things he remembered to share at the end of his entries.

Shaun had good format and handwriting since the beginning of Family Message Journals except for indenting at a new paragraph. His organization and grouping of ideas improved as the project progressed. Shaun did display his personality in many of his entries, creating his author's voice. He was keenly aware of his audience always.

In his interview, Shaun said he thought his handwriting and spelling did improve. And with "explaining stuff." Shaun asked for confirmation, "Didn't I get a little bit smarter at bein' detailed?" He did acknowledge that he needed to "get better at spelling."

Shaun's mother did not come for her scheduled interview. She did not come to the rescheduled interview. She did not return the interview questions mailed to her home, which was a last resort.

Summary for Central Research Question: How can writing instruction through Family Message Journals impact third grade students' writing ability?

Although some students showed more profound improvement than others, every one of the 6 case study students improved. Handwriting and format were the most obvious elements but a second look displays positive progression in all four domains. Just as each student was unique, their strengths, weaknesses, and family circumstances were unique as well. Timothy and Ethan displayed the most dramatic improvement, whereas Dalton and Shaun's spelling weakness will take longer to show significant progress. However, all students improved in their own weakest element.

Assessment was made easy due to the Family Message Journal's progression. By simply leafing through the journal from beginning to end, students' strengths and weaknesses may be easily identified. Specific elements of writing may be pinpointed for extra attention. Parents appreciated being able to witness the steady improvement of their child, as well. For some parents, their child's starting point was an eye opener that their child was not as proficient as they had thought.

Subsidiary Question 1: What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum?

Introduction

The following exchange took place during Dalton's interview, regarding writing about different subjects in his Family Message Journal:

Teacher: Do you think Family Message Journals helped you learn more in math, science, social studies, and reading when you wrote on topics from those subjects?

Dalton: Yes, actually it does help me. It helped me a lot in reading and science and social studies, but math ... not so much.

Teacher: Can you explain how the journals helped you?

Dalton: Actually it helped, like when we wrote about them big humongous waves under the ocean. What are they called again?

Teacher: Tsunamis?

Dalton: Yes! I remember it because P-Daddy wrote me back. When I wrote about it, I knew I understood it. I didn't really think I understood it at first, but when I started explaining it in my journal, I knew I understood it.

Teacher: So you think the journals helped you realize you understood the tsunamis?

Dalton: (excitedly) Yes, because, used to, before when we didn't write in journals, I wasn't really good at my stuff. But now since we been writing in journals I been doing a lot better with my work.

Teacher: Why do you think that?

Dalton: It just helped me a lot with stuff like math, science, social studies, and reading. It just really heped me out. Since we have been writing in journals I been making really good grades on my report card.

(Interview with Dalton, February 4, 2008)

As a third-grade teacher in Georgia, I find covering our entire curriculum a challenging and daunting task. Our Georgia Performance Standards require that we cover so much material that it seems as if we need at least a couple more hours in our school day. Added to the necessity to teach the required curriculum is the pressure to perform on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), Georgia's standardized test.

Third grade is one of the important No Child Left Behind grades, in which students must pass the reading portion of the test in order to be promoted to the next grade. So important is this mandate, my colleagues and I often need so much time to teach reading and math, that other content areas like language, science, and social

studies are sacrificed. These other content areas are in our lesson plans every day, but when time is up, the lessons must be put off until another day. Since writing is not tested on the CRCT at all, teaching writing is very often the first lesson to be sacrificed.

One of the purposes of this study was to use the Family Message Journals to teach writing while teaching one of the content area lessons. If there is no time to teach formal writing lessons, include them while teaching language, math, science or social studies.

During the Family Message Journal data collection period (August 27, 2007 until December 17, 2007) the students usually wrote Monday through Thursday. In all, there were 51 journal entries on a variety of topics. Table 10 illustrates each content area and the number of entries regarding that subject.

Table 10

Content area and number of entries

Content Area	Number of entries
Language Arts	14
Reading	8
Math	8
Science	9
Social Studies	8
Other	4
Total	51

Writing in the Family Message Journals about the different content areas introduced my third graders to a whole new genre of writing. While they had a lot of experience writing narrative stories from first- and second-grade, informational writing for an audience was new to them. A lesson about the different characteristics of narrative versus expository writing taught them that there was more to writing than characters and plot from the creative writing they were more familiar with.

The first aspect my students learned when writing about content areas was that if they did not learn the concept well enough, they could not explain it to their parents. The students also learned that unless they used a good bit of detail, their parents would not understand what they were trying to teach them. As will be discussed further with Subsidiary Question 2, students had to be reminded that their parents were not in school and they could not take for granted that their parents knew what they meant. See Appendix L for each daily Family Message Journal entry, the content area, and the daily topic from which the topic was written.

Writing Across the Curriculum – Content Areas

Science

Science was the content area that students enjoyed writing about most in our Family Message Journals. The source of this enjoyment was in the form of our class pet, a fish named Bubba the Betta. (Actually, we had four different bettas. Our class defied the adage that one cannot kill a betta.) The class was introduced to the betta as part of our Habits of Mind unit, in which we practiced scientific protocol such as observation,

collecting and reporting data, and scientific ethics. One of the most rewarding events during the journal project was when Ethan's mother, through the Family Message Journal, suggested an experiment for our Bubba. (More details of this experiment will be explained in the discussion for Subsidiary Question 3.)

The Family Message Journal entry in Figure 72 is an example of Ethan's science entry and his mother's response. This entry prompted our class to write up a formal experiment complete with materials, hypothesis, observation, and discussion. The students were fascinated to find that Bubba tried to fight himself, thinking his own reflection was the enemy. The next day, our results were the topic of Family Message Journals.

August 28, 2007

Dear dad and mom, Love, [redacted]
 today we are talking about
 bubba the betta. He's fun to watch.
 He also makes ^{me} I want to swim. He turns
 bright colors when he's excited. Bubba
 loves playing with us. Bubba doesn't eat
 too much food. He's a male though. Betta
 means - Chinese fighting fish. He ate
 alot on Friday. love you.

Dear [redacted]

Try putting a mirror up to Bubba.
 Betas' react wildly if they see themselves
 and think there is another male around.
 They'll flare their fins & get colorful,
 ready to fight! Hint - "fighting fish."

Love,
 Mom

I am so glad that we have this time
 to write each other. I look forward to this each
 night. I am proud of you for all your work in
 school. Keep up the Great Grades. Love you Dad.

Figure 72. Ethan's science entry, prompting an experiment.

Math

Math is not a subject most people think about in conjunction with writing. I had anticipated more of a struggle with some of my students about writing during math, but they embraced it beautifully.

Entries for math ranged from the simple to the complex, but students did an excellent job of taking some of the more abstract mathematical concepts and understanding them enough to explain them to someone else in writing. Figure 73 is a simple lesson, missing addends, from early in the year.

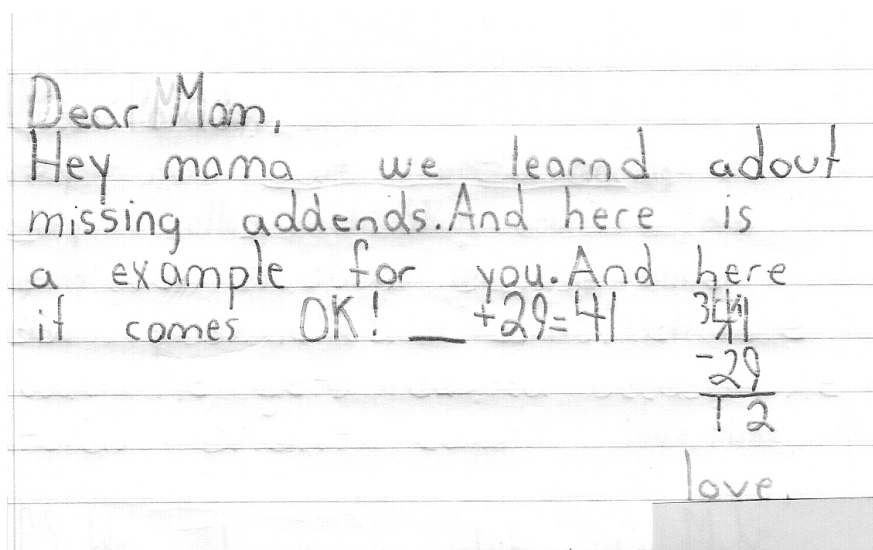


Figure 73. Miller explains missing addends.

A favorite math lesson involved a tricky and abstract concept: subtracting across zeroes. Since this class had a particularly difficult time with place value, it was not surprising that subtracting across zeroes was more than the students could comprehend. We did many examples with base ten blocks, but a few students still did not understand. I introduced the class to “my trick” for subtracting across zeroes. (I always introduce it

very dramatically, sometimes as my alter-ego, my crazy twin sister from England.) I called the trick the McCann Magic Mathematical Marvel. Hallie enjoyed explaining the procedure to her mom by using an example problem. In her example (Figure 74), the numeral in the ones place was given a “ten,” while the remaining 8000 became 7999. She did a fantastic job with her illustration, and I thought it was impressive that he used a five digit example to show off to his mom.

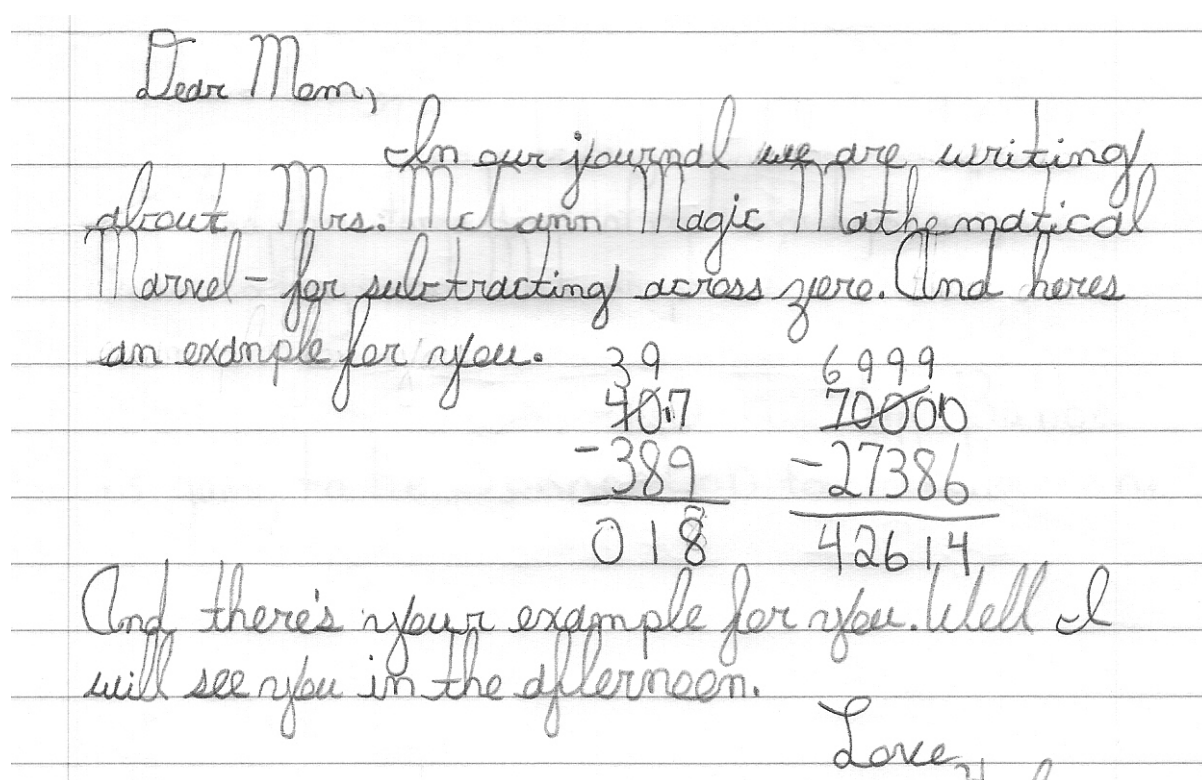


Figure 74. Hallie's's math entry explaining subtracting across zeroes.

Social Studies

Social studies provided many opportunities to write. A favorite during the Family Message Journals project was studying about the three kinds of communities: urban,

suburban, and rural. Parent responses from this topic varied as the parents told of the kinds of communities they lived in growing up. Students were able to not only learn new information about their own parents, but also earned from the other 14 parents as well, as their classmates read aloud the parent responses.

Many students were not aware of the different places their own parents grew up. These entries and responses generated many wonderful discussions. This journal entry is so memorable that students have internalized the three kinds of communities into long-term memory. Whenever the topic comes up by way of formal review or arbitrarily, these particular Family Message Journal entries are always mentioned. One humorous example was when we were discussing one classmate's upcoming move to Wyoming. We all recalled our study of the three kinds of communities to discuss their friend's new environment. Suddenly, one hand went up. I called on him and he proudly announced, "My cousin is part Wyoming!" The class erupted in friendly laughter.

The following (Figure 75) is Shaun's Family Message Journal entry on the three kinds of communities. His mother's response is shown as well.

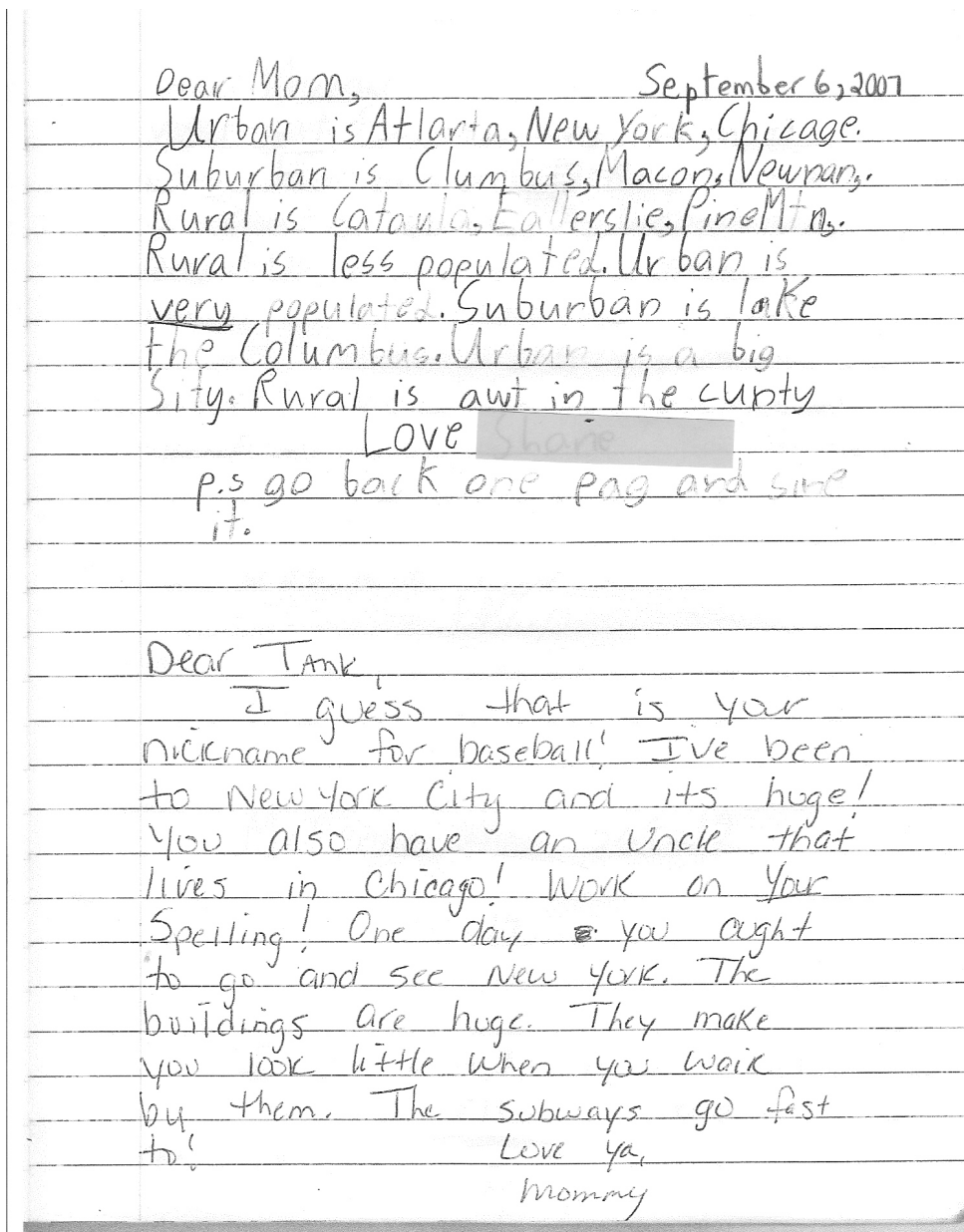


Figure 75. Shaun's social studies entry on the three kinds of communities.

Reading

When the Family Message Journal entry was devoted to reading, it was usually to introduce the reading story for the week. The students tell their parents the title and author of the story, and explain the genre of the story. One week, the class was reading a Native American legend called *Dancing Drum*. We had written about the story the day

before, with the students explaining the meaning of “legend” and a brief synopsis of the story. The next day, I was reading the same story aloud. Ethan suddenly noticed a design in one of the illustrations and recognized it as a *mola*, which was what they were studying in art. This discovery was a gift – a perfect teachable moment. The class was suddenly wildly excited to see a concept in art being applied in a reading story. Dalton immediately suggested that the class write a new Family Message Journal entry about *Dancing Drum*, but this time explaining the *mola* discovery.

Other reading entries were utilized to explain a reading strategy such as reread to clarify, use context clues, or decode long words. Other entries explained a reading skill such as cause and effect, making inferences, or author’s purpose.

Two sample entries follow. The first is Katherine’s example (Figure 76) of a reading skill, author’s purpose. Katherine was embarrassed by her mom’s response. Her classmates did not understand why Katherine’s mom used the term “razzle dazzle” and, though Mom meant the phrase as a compliment to her daughter, Katherine was mortified that her mother caused such attention. Katherine’s mom brought up this same entry in our interview. She said Katherine was very dramatic in discussing the embarrassment of her mom’s entry and to stick to “regular words like everybody else’s parents!” Mom said to me, “See what I mean about the Drama Queen?”

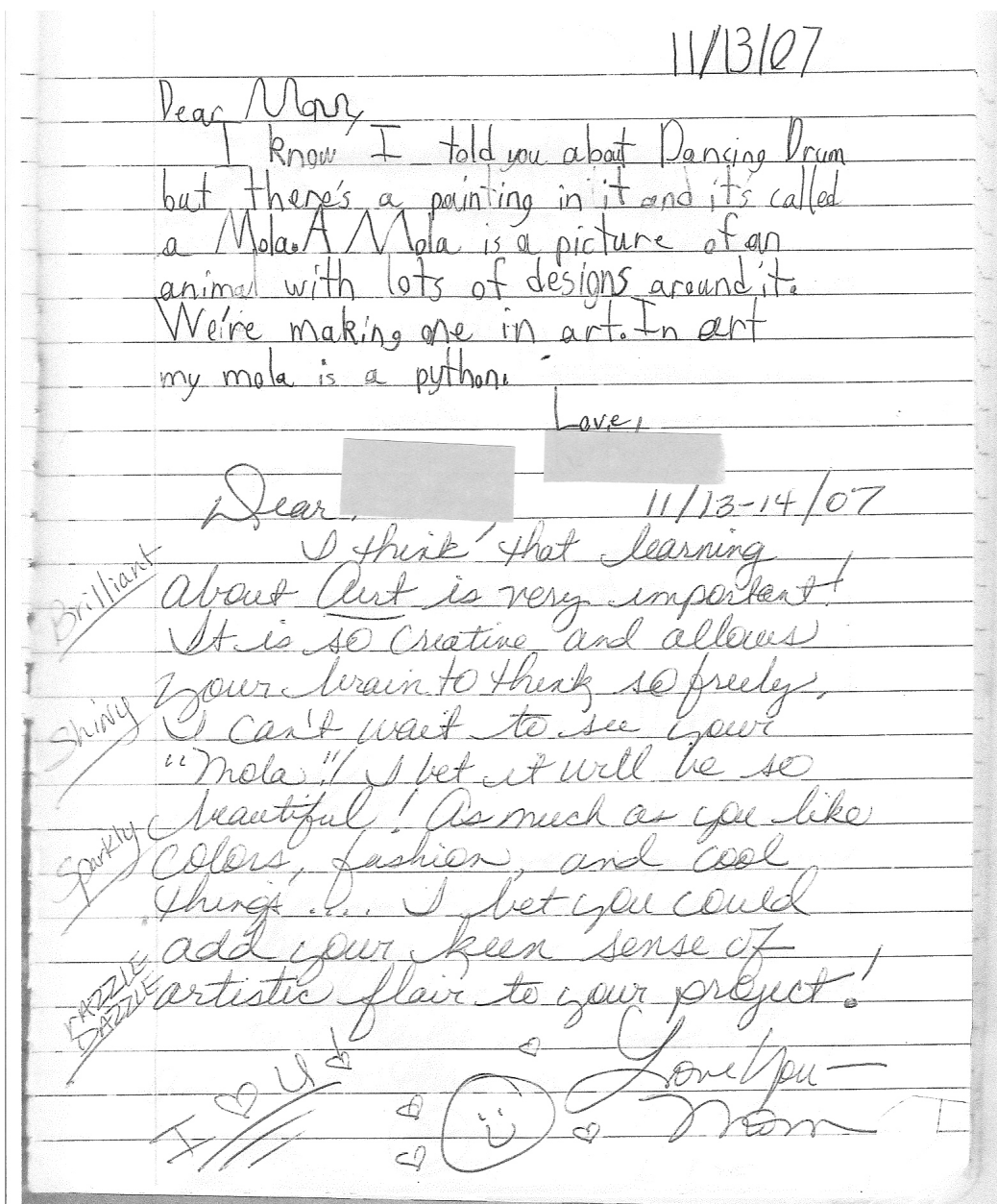


Figure 76. Kimberly's reading entry about molas.

The second reading example (Figure 77) is Alan's entry explaining author's purpose. His dad does a great job of sharing the types of books she reads for work and for pleasure.

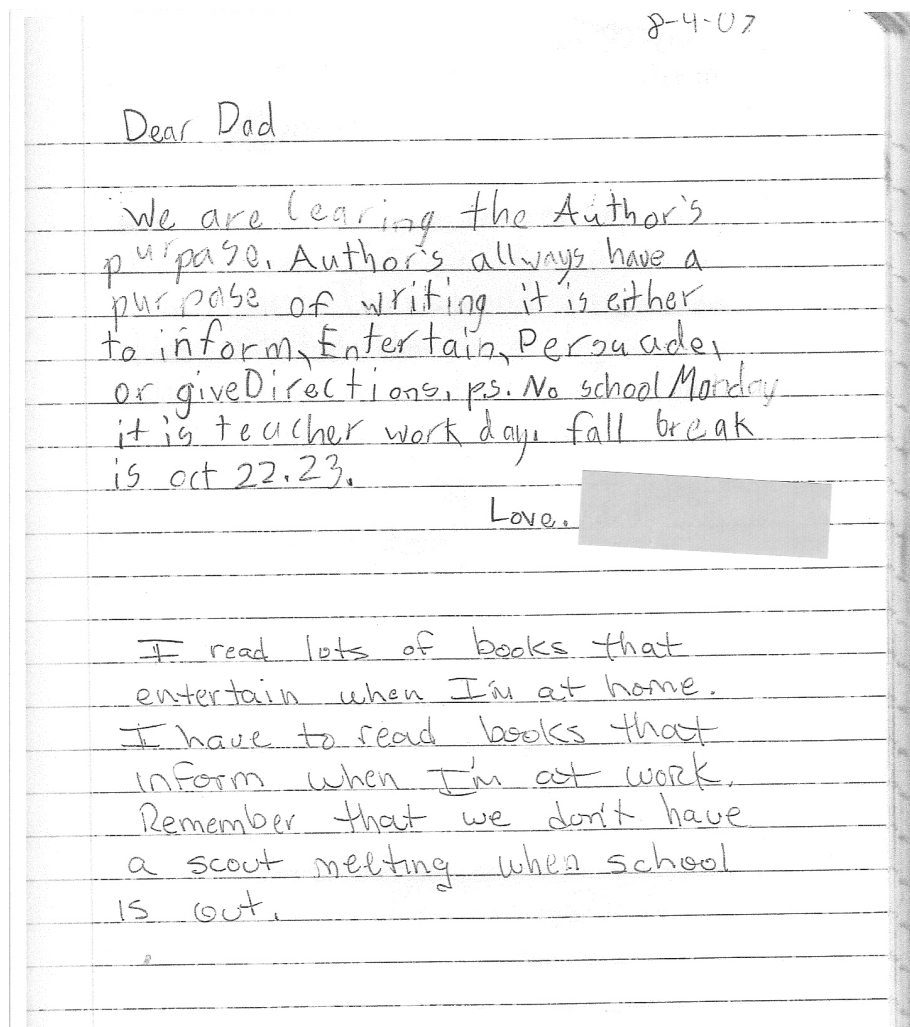


Figure 77. Alan's reading entry to explain author's purpose.

Language Arts

Writing in language arts was the easiest to implement, but as naturally as writing fits into language arts, the time factor was still a problem. Therefore, writing through Family Message Journals allowed more writing lessons than we normally would include in our language curriculum. For example, one journal entry in language arts was about subjects and predicates. While we naturally study the parts of a sentence in grammar, we normally would not write about the sentence parts to explain the concept to others. The

students enjoyed taking the fundamentals of grammar and mechanics and actually applying them within a journal entry (Figure 78).

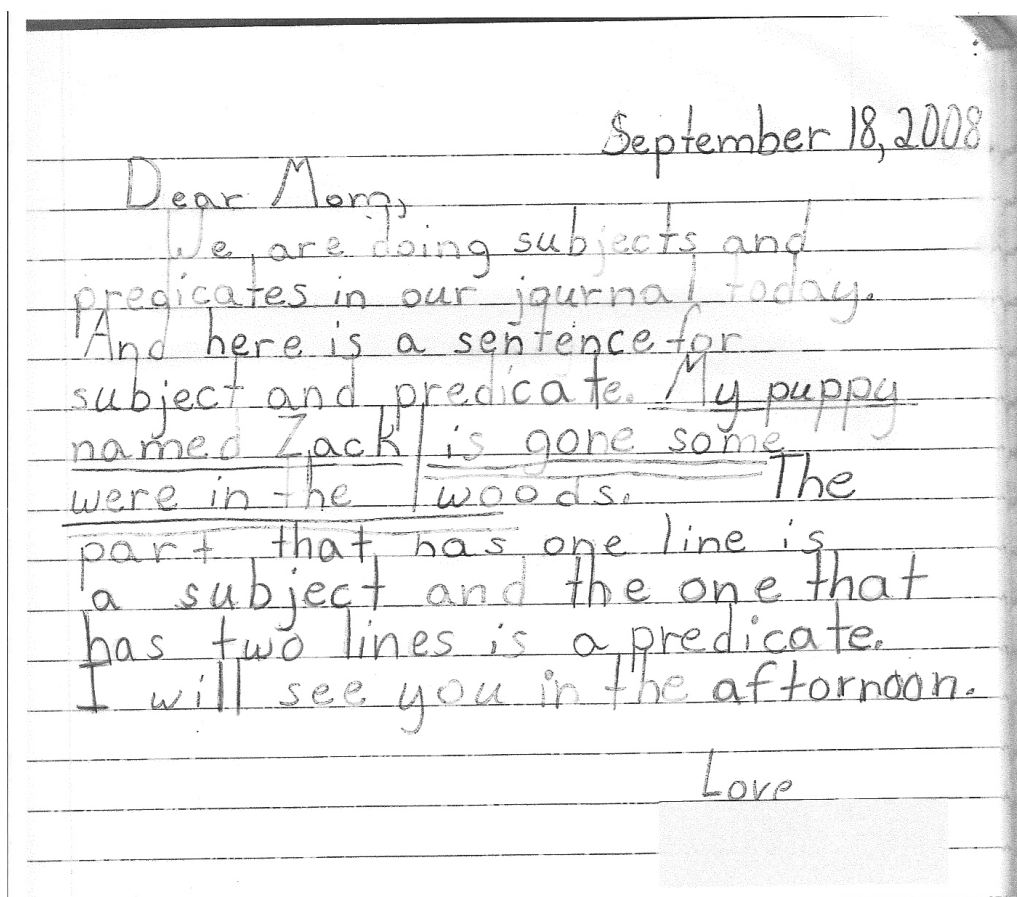


Figure 78. Example grammar entry in language arts.

Again, Bubba the Betta, our class fish, provided many opportunities for good writing topics. The students had so much fun creating an “Ode to Bubba” the day after his untimely death. Figure 79 is an example:

09/25/07

Dear Dad and Mom,

Ode to Bubba

Bubba was a good
fish. He swam so gracefully.
In the way his scales
shone so beautiful
it makes me cry.
We hoped he was
just sleeping at the
bottom but, he
was such an enjoy-
ment. We will
always remember our
little friend.

Figure 79. Ode to Bubba language arts entry.

One of the students' favorite language arts entries was a creative writing day. I knew I had to be absent the next day, so I thought I would let the class entertain the substitute with a story about him. The title was *My Substitute Is an Alien*. The class enjoys using their budding imaginations, and they delighted in reading their stories aloud to the substitute. An example story follows (Figure 80).

11/28/07

Dear Mom and Dad,

We're going to have a sub tomorrow and Mrs. McCann wanted us to make up a story called "My Substitute is an Alien!" This might be funny, guess who it's going to be..... Mr. Coker! So here's my story. Once in a far away planet called Glo lived a lot of green glowing gross aliens. One day, one alien thought "Maybe I should go check out some other planets." So he put on his protective suit (which by the way looked like human) and set off to go to a place called Earth. He landed near a school named Mulberry Creek Elementary. He walked in and some people rushed toward him and asked him to substitute he said yes because he wanted to try anything. So they took him to Mrs. McCann's classroom and left him there. He saw other aliens (which by the way were humans) and said "I think I'm safe." And he took off his protective suit and all the students screamed. He said "WHAT!" and one of the students yelled "YOU'RE AN ALIEN!" And that's the end. P.S. Both of you Love, Write!

Figure 80. Kimberly's creative writing *My Substitute Is an Alien* in language arts.

Summary

While it was still difficult squeezing minutes into the content areas for Family Message Journal time, it was well worth the effort. Many days the class sacrificed free time in order to finish writing a Family Message Journal entry or to finish reading aloud parent responses, but the students always voted to do journals if they had to choose. I am positive that without utilizing a few precious minutes from the content areas, my class would not have had the opportunity for these 51 writing experiences or the chance to hear 15 parent responses for each of those experiences.

Writing the Family Message Journal entries for content area concepts enabled the students to check their understanding of the newly learned lessons. Discussing the topics with parents at home further emphasized the lesson, and hearing the repetition of the concept when reading aloud all students' parental responses further imbedded the new concept into the students' long term memories. Even now, I have found when reviewing past lessons, students can recall information they had written in their Family Message Journals.

Subsidiary Question 2: What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals as a tool for improving communication skills in elementary school students?

Introduction

It is important to review the Definition of Terms used in this section:

Written Communication Skills. In this study, *written communication skills* refers to the students' ability to demonstrate audience awareness; to clearly convey the message to the reader. In other words, the goal is not to merely relate the facts, but to bear in mind

that the student's family was not present at school, and the writer must paint a picture enhanced with details, which reflects the writer's voice.

"Improving" communication skills. In studies conducted by Wollman-Bonilla (2000), Horton (2002), and the Canfield Writing Project (2004), all three determined writing improvement and improvement in communication skills by simply comparing Family Message Journal entries of the case study students at the beginning, middle, and end of the data collection period. This researcher will follow suite, guided by the criteria from the Georgia Writing Assessment.

Wollman-Bonilla (2000) was the first to formally study Family Message Journals. In an email to me, she offered this advice, "I wish you the best and simply suggest that you keep at the forefront the importance of writing for a purpose and audience – that, in my opinion, is why you have seen such great results, and why so much of school writing is so dismal – there is no purpose or audience other than the teacher" (J. Wollman-Bonilla, personal communication, July 3, 2007).

Students did learn the importance of writing for a purpose and audience. Emerging from the Family Message Journal project were some profound discoveries about communication by the students:

1. Clarity is important for an audience.
2. Communication is a two-way conversation.
3. Communication can take different forms.
4. Communication takes practice and parents are not perfect either.
5. Writing is powerful.

Student Discoveries about Communication

Communication Must Have Clarity

Students got their first lesson on the importance of communication with an audience almost immediately, on the second day of parent responses.

The following vignette was taken from the Researcher's Reflective Journal. (Names of all class members have been changed to protect privacy.) Madison had just finished reading her journal entry and her mom's response (Figure 81), below.

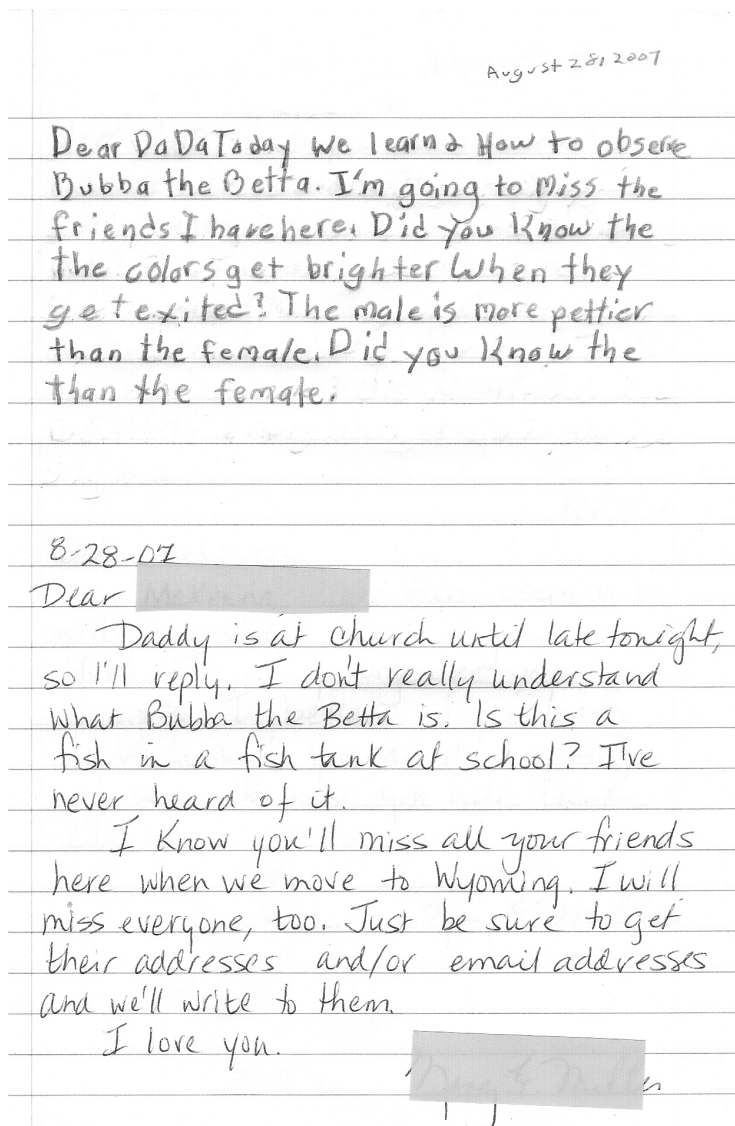


Figure 81. First lesson on communication skills, August 29, 2007.

Teacher: Your mom wants you to do some work before you move, huh? But also, you must need to clarify something. What did you say again?

Madison: [reads entry, Figure 81, again]

Teacher: So do you realize why your mom said she didn't understand? Is Bubba a fish in a tank in your class? Do you realize why she asked that?

Madison: Yeah, 'cause I didn't tell her what it was.

Teacher: That's right. You never said Bubba was a fish! He could be a hamster or a guinea pig or an iguana.

Madison: Isn't Bubba a fish name?

Teacher: Not necessarily.

Madison: Oh.

Teacher: That tells you what? You need to make sure you clarify that, because your mom wasn't here. If you read that same entry aloud to our class, would we all understand what you meant?

Class: Yeah.

Teacher: Yes, because we were all here. If you were to talk about Bubba the Betta here, we would all know what you were talking about because we were all in class, of course. But you have to look at it with a different way of thinking when you're writing to somebody who was not here with us.

Madison: Yeah, because we're here looking at Bubba.

Teacher: Right, you always have to be mindful of your audience.

(from the Researcher's Reflective Journal, August 29, 2007)

This conversation sparked a lesson on communication with an audience. The class discussed what kinds of details were necessary now that they were writing to someone who was not present with us. They came to realize that this notion applies not only to introducing our new fish, but to anything in the future they must explain to their parents.

Communication Is a Two-Way Conversation

On the third day of parent responses, a situation arose in which Ethan's mom had asked a question the day before about the story the class was reading. The following day his mom reminded him that he never answered her question from the day before (see Figure 82).

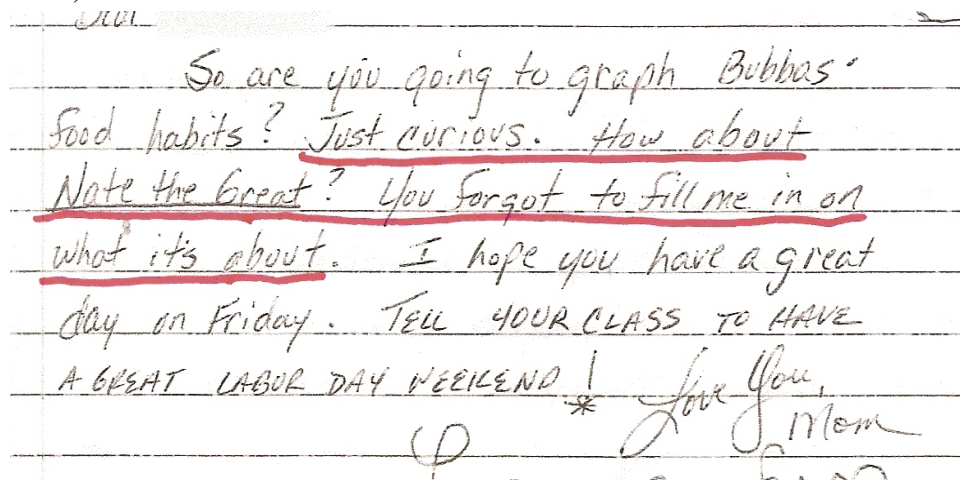


Figure 82. Ethan did not answer his mom's question from yesterday.

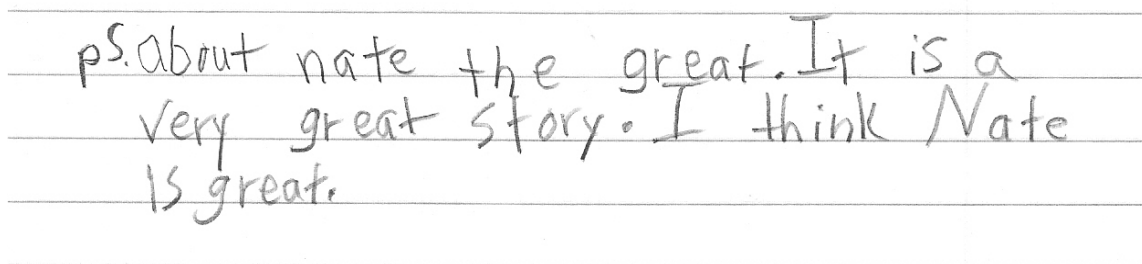
Ethan's not answering his mom's question initiated a lively discussion about communication being two-way, and that each student had a responsibility to keep up their end of the conversation. Now they understood that if their parents asked them a question, they could not just ignore it and treat the next entry as a separate letter. They realized that the Family Message Journals were ongoing communication with an audience, and to ignore a question was ignoring that there was an audience at all.

Communication Can Take Different Forms

Throughout the course of the Family Message Journals, students discovered steps they could take that would aid their communication. A few include the postscripts, graphic organizers, and illustrations.

Postscripts

As the class discussed the problem of not answering questions from the day before, some students said they had the same situation. Someone suggested that students just go back one page and answer the question on the page where it was asked. No, they decided. Someone realized that their parents probably would not think to look backward for their answers. Suddenly Miller exclaimed, “I got it! After we write what you tell us to, we can do a p.s.!” The class thought that was a fabulous idea, and the postscript was launched (see Figure 83).



p.s. about nate the great. It is a very great story. I think Nate is great.

Figure 83. Miller suggested a postscript for answering previous parent questions.

Graphic Organizers

The notion of graphic organizers came into play the day students explained place value to their parents. Some were having difficulty putting a fairly abstract mathematical concept into words. Dalton, who is very shy and seldom talks or shows much personality, came up with a great idea for everybody (see Figure 84).

Dalton: I'm not sure I can explain this.

Teacher: Try it in little steps. What's the first thing you could tell your mom?

Dalton: We could write, um, we learned place value. Place value is like this [showing me his paper] and then we could like draw it.

Teacher: What is it?

Dalton: A graph, like you did. It's just a different kind of version.

Teacher: Draw a graphic organizer? That is a graphic organizer, isn't it?

Dalton: Yeah. It's the same way to communicate in words. It's just a picture of something.

Teacher: You are going to communicate in a picture as a graph, like your graphic organizer instead of words?

Dalton: Yeah. It's still communicating on paper and stuff but just a different way.

Teacher: Beautiful. I love how you said that.

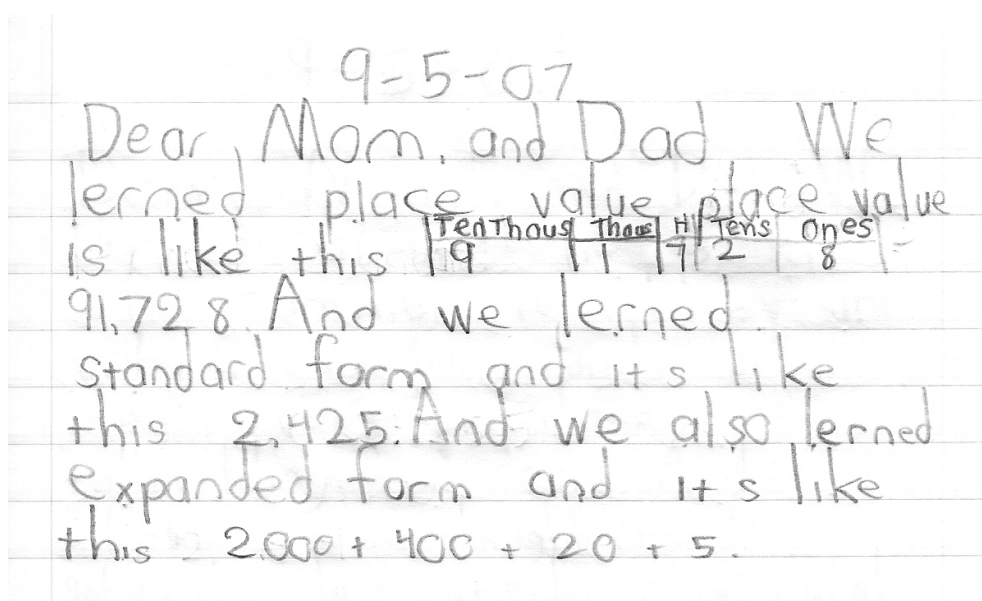


Figure 84. Dalton used a graphic organizer to help explain place value.

Illustrations

Illustrations became a favorite means of aiding communication for the class.

Unlike graphic organizers, which were used as a necessity to help explain a newly

learned concept, illustrations were mostly for fun. Nevertheless, students used them as a

way to communicate to their parents. Figure 85 is an example of illustrations students felt enhanced their communication.

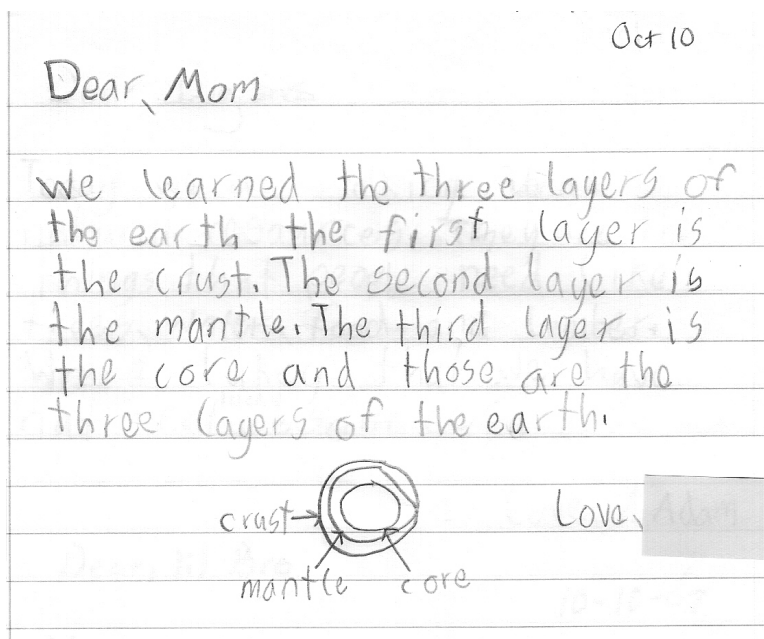


Figure 85. Alan draws and labels the three layers of the earth.

Communication Takes Practice and Parents Are Not Perfect Either

When parents responded to their children each night, they instantly became models for writing. Most all parental entries were positive models for correct writing. The vast majority of parent responses correctly used the friendly letter format modeled by their children. Each day, students were able to see correct format for dates, correct capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Students, aware of their audience, worked to correctly use these conventions, as their parents did.

In mid-November, I noticed that students were still forgetting to indent, or indenting incorrectly. Alan, in particular, just did not understand the concept. “You mean you have to do it every single time you start a new paragraph?” Finally, I had the idea to have Alan look through his parents’ entries for examples of indenting. He found that Mom had indented, but Dad had not. Adam now understood, and began grinning. He said, “I’m gonna write a p.s. to my mama and say ‘Nice indenting Mom.’”

Parents did not always model perfect writing. However, it did not appear that parental mistakes hindered student learning. On the contrary, as students became more proficient editors, they loved nothing more than finding their parents’ mistakes. The following anecdotal incidents were compiled from the Researcher’s Reflective Journal:

1. Miller once found mistakes in one of his mom’s entries and remarked, “How embarrassing!” Timothy and Christina spotted run-on sentences in their parents’ writing sometimes. Kimberly kept finding examples of misplaced commas in her dad’s responses.
2. Demetrius noticed that his mother used the third person when referring to herself, such as, “Demetrius, Mama is tired and going to bed.” He made a point to ask her why when he got home.
3. Dalton once felt that his mom must have left out some key words in an entry that he did not think made sense. However, a classmate read the same sentence with different emphasis than Dalton read, and he realized she was correct.
4. Hailey once remarked that her dad asked her a question that she had already answered. She complained that he wasn’t paying attention and he needed to pay more attention for comprehension.

5. Christina became irritated when her dad did not write, “Dear Christina” or “Love.” Her mom, however, usually fared better except for once. She said, “It’s funny. My mom forgot the greeting, but she wrote this word really, really big across the bottom of the page – FOCUS. What’s that all about?”

See Figure 86 in which Ethan’s mom writes, “See! Moms make mistakes while writing too!”

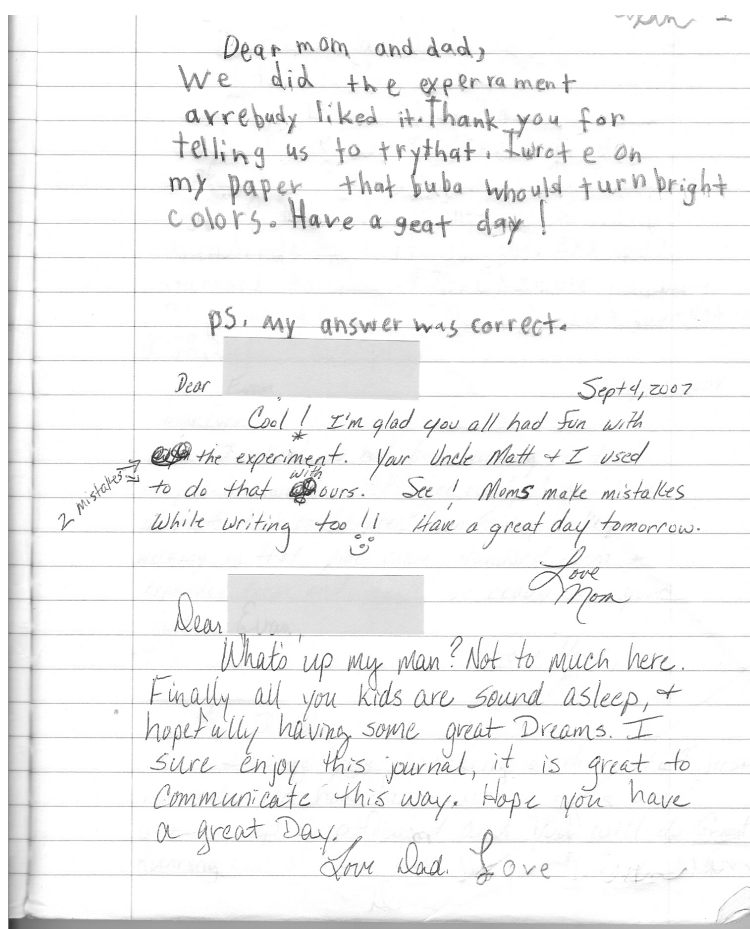


Figure 86. Ethan’s mom admits that moms make mistakes while writing too.

Communication Is Powerful

Family Message Journals allowed some students for the first time to realize they have a voice. They found that through the journals, they had their parents' complete attention, if only for a few minutes. They realized that not only could the Family Message Journals be used for what their teacher required, but that they could actually be used to let their voices be heard. All took full advantage.

1. Timothy used the Family Message Journals as his opportunity to charm his mother when he was on punishment and to ask for rewards and gifts. He also used the chance to write to his brother, which he thought was "so cool."
2. Ethan used his journal for one-on-one time with *both* of his parents, as both wrote every night. Even though he was asleep when they wrote, he knows they were thinking only of him at the time, and not his three siblings.
3. Alan and his father took turns exchanging dry wit in the pages of his journal, while his mom comforted him with her praise and affection.
4. Kimberly used her Family Message Journal to show off her dramatic and creative side, and her mother and father responded with appropriate amazement and abundant affection.
5. Dalton's Family Message Journal served to strengthen the bond he had with his mother, but more importantly, to form a relationship with his stepfather, which had been suffering.

6. Shaun's Family Message Journal was his way of garnering any attention at all from his mother. When he did, he beamed with pride.

It was imperative that parents respond to their children each night. When the parents wrote back, they were sending a strong message that writing is important and valued as a form of communication. Their children received that message, and felt empowered.

Summary

The case study students learned that Family Message Journals could be used to communicate with their parents. During the course of the project, they learned valuable lessons that will continue to enhance their ability to communicate: clarity is important with an audience, communication is two-way, communication can take different forms, communication takes practice, and communication is powerful. These discoveries led the students to understand the importance of writing as a form of communication.

Subsidiary Question 3: What is the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education?

Introduction

Vignette – First Day of Parent Responses

As students began filing into the classroom for homeroom, students began to gather at the back table by the sink. They were comparing and reading last night's journal responses from their parents. The following is from my Reflective Journal:

I have never seen anything like it. Kids were gathering at the back table with lively discussion. They were supposed to be getting their morning work, taking

care of their book bags and moving their attendance and lunch cards. The huddle became bigger and wider. I had already told them to break it up once. A lot of good that did. I finally asked what was going on. They were looking at each other's parent responses from the Family Message Journals and reading them aloud, as if comparing – My mama wrote more than your mama!

I can honestly say, without hesitation, that this was the first time in my 17 years of teaching that I have seen kids so excited about writing. I mean seriously, how many teachers see their kids gathering as if some friend had brought in the latest electronic gadget for all to gawk at? (Reflective Journal, August 28, 2007)

Before the class even began to read their parent responses, I sensed their anticipation. Some students appeared to be bursting at the seams. I thought it might be best to allow a few to share some comments first. I asked the students to share their thoughts about the first day of parent responses:

Dalton: My mom was so excited she had to go to the next page!

Ethan: This is gonna be fun with the journals. Are we gonna read them out loud every day? (I nod yes.) YES!

Haley: I know another good reason for the Family Message Journals. My mom always asks me what I did at school and I don't like to tell her. Now I can just point to the journals.

Christina: My mom said it was a good idea because she liked it a lot and she might do it with her preschool class. They can do it with their writing. She could use it for their handwriting.

Ethan: Mom said it's good because if anybody visits, it could bring our family closer together. They could write in our journals.

Timothy: My mom said she was happy about me writing in journals so when I get grown and have kids I could read my journal to them. My grandma, I call her. She said my mama had told her about that we was writing journals and she said that's a good idea cause when I like, cause I can show her all the things I did in school.

Alan: My mom said it was a pretty good idea for me to start writing stuff and showing you our improved handwriting and stuff.

On that first day of reading aloud parent responses, 11 students had responses and four did not. The four who were not able to participate seemed sorrowful watching their

classmates enjoying themselves while they had little to contribute. The next day, every single child had a response.

Family Participation

Family Response Rate

Family participation in the project was 100%. The daily parental response rate was high as well (Table 11), as parents in the study were dedicated to the Family Message Journals.

Table 11

Family Response Rate

Student	Response Rate
Timothy	95%
Ethan	100%
Alan	98%
Kimberly	100%
Dalton	96%
Shaun	87%

Table 11 suggests that parents took the Family Message Journal project seriously and consequently communicated to their children that their writing was valuable and important. Families demonstrated support for the journals in their replies (Figure 87).

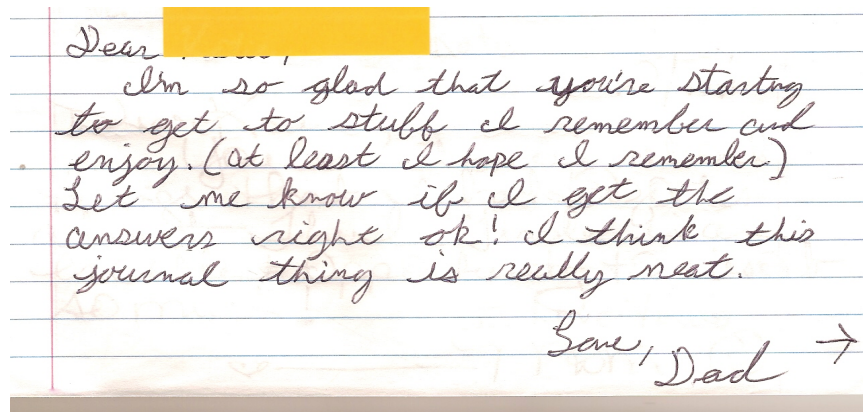


Figure 87. A dad lends his support of Family Message Journals.

Parent Replies

As parent replies were read, reread, and analyzed, several themes emerged as functions of parental communication (refer to Appendix K for coding). These categories were common among every family. Families' replies served to:

1. express interest in a newly learned concept
2. share new information about a newly learned concept
3. ask questions about a new concept
4. ask for clarification when an entry was poorly communicated
5. share a memory, personal experience, or story
6. praise or show affection to the child
7. give advice or reminders to the child
8. scold
9. share humor

Expressing Interest

Most all parent replies expressed an interest in what their child was learning in school (see Figure 88). Many responses also invited the child to teach the parent more about the subject. This interest boosted self-esteem, making the child feel like an expert on the newly learned concept. Most student entries tried to teach something that their parents did not know. However, even when parents admitted knowing the information already, most confessed that it had been so long since they were taught many concepts in school that they had forgotten and were glad to be reminded. Many parents expressed that they were impressed that their children were learning such concepts so early and that they recalled learning them much later in school.

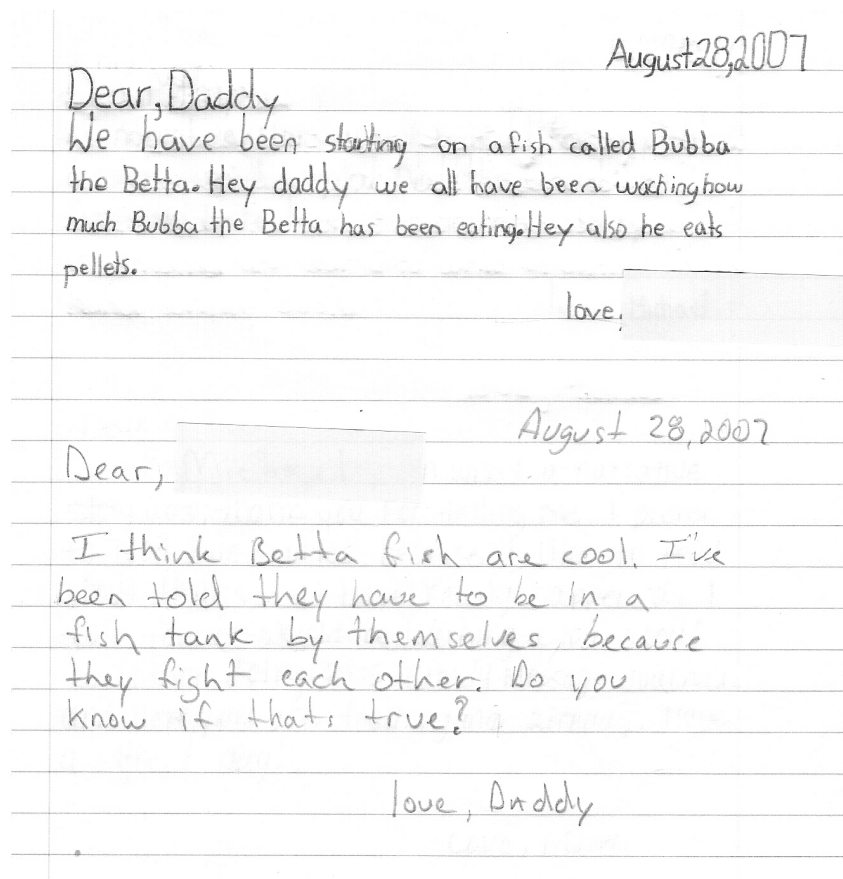


Figure 88. Dad shows interest in the new betta.

Sharing New Information

One of the most important functions of Family Message Journals was the sharing of new information (Figure 89) about the new topics students were learning. The most profound aspect of sharing parent responses was that not only did each child learn something from their own parent, but they also benefitted from the knowledge of the other 14 families as well.

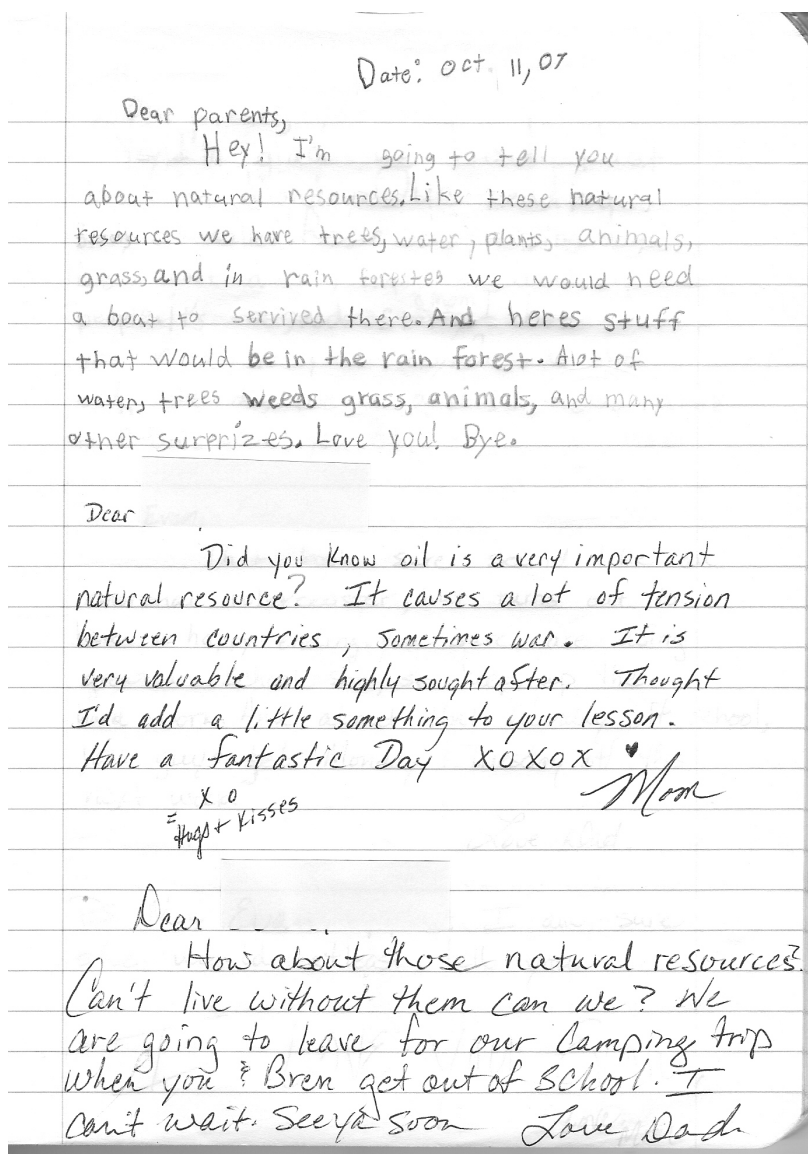


Figure 89. Jordan's mom shares new information about oil as a natural resource.

Asking Questions

In the initial letter to parents, it was suggested that they ask questions of their children to promote interest in their topic. Parents embraced this notion (Figure 90). Their many questions tested our skills as investigators as we were sent to the Internet many times in search of answers. These questions sparked many others as well. Best of all, students used higher order thinking skills to impress their parents with their clever replies.

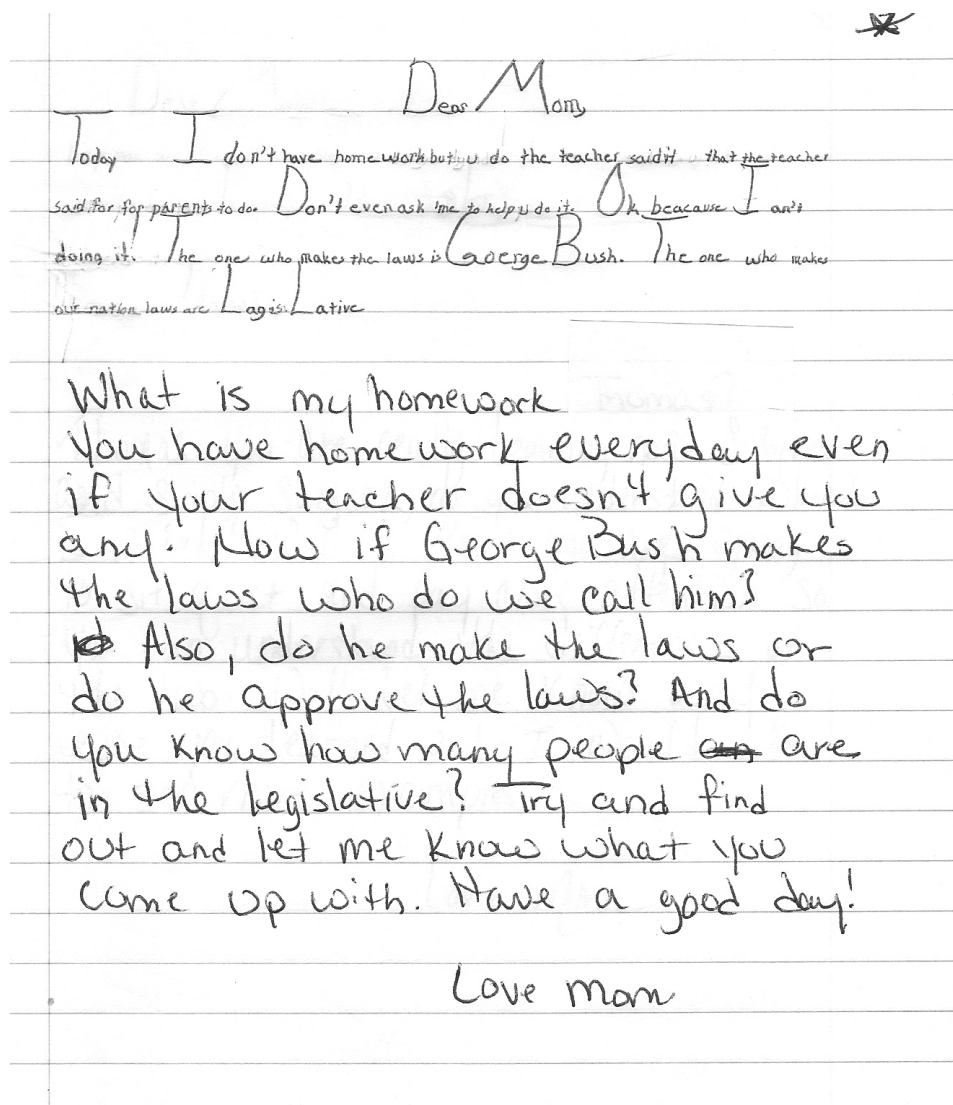


Figure 90. Timothy's mom quizzes him on our government.

Asking for Clarification

One important lesson parents taught was that clarity was imperative for the reader to be able to communicate. If an entry was not clear, students realized their parents had a difficult time responding. Many times, parents had to ask for clarification to be able to respond (Figure 91).

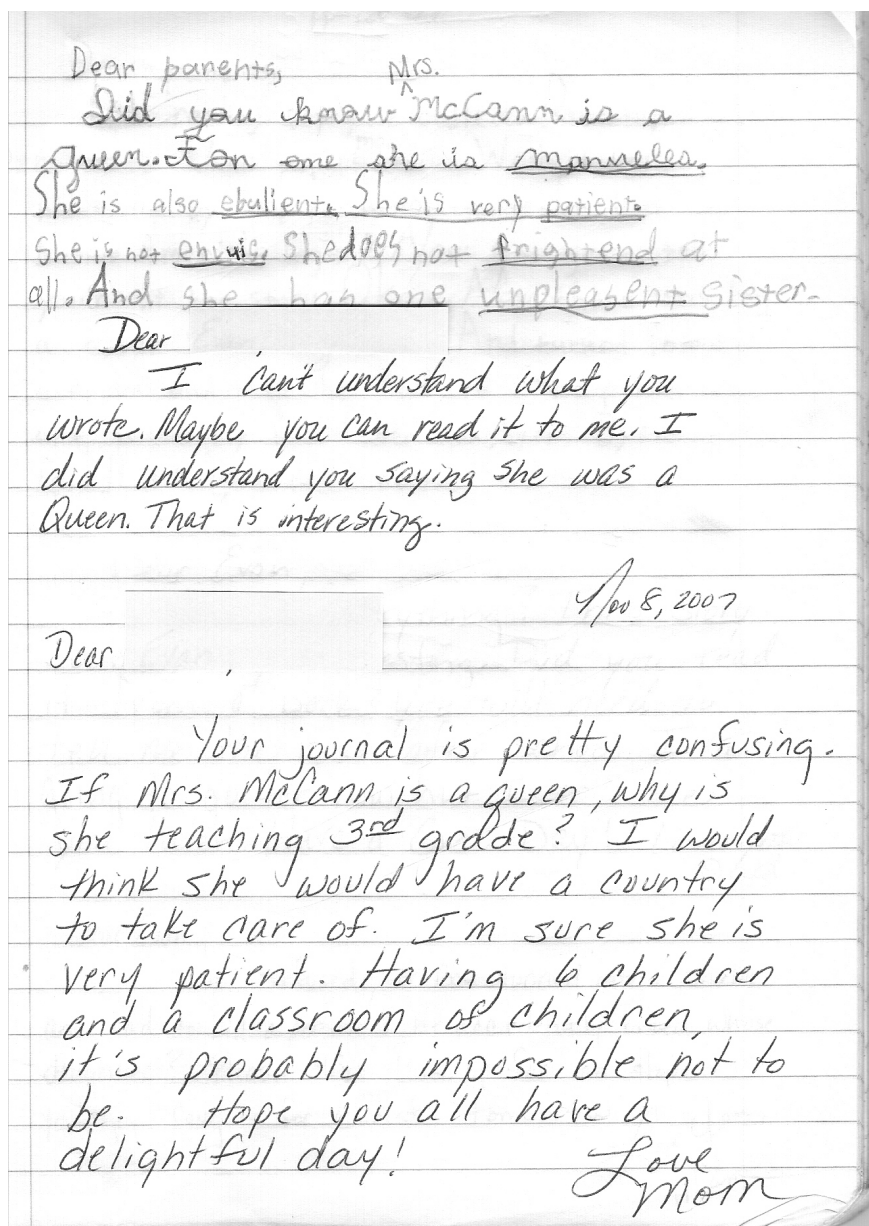
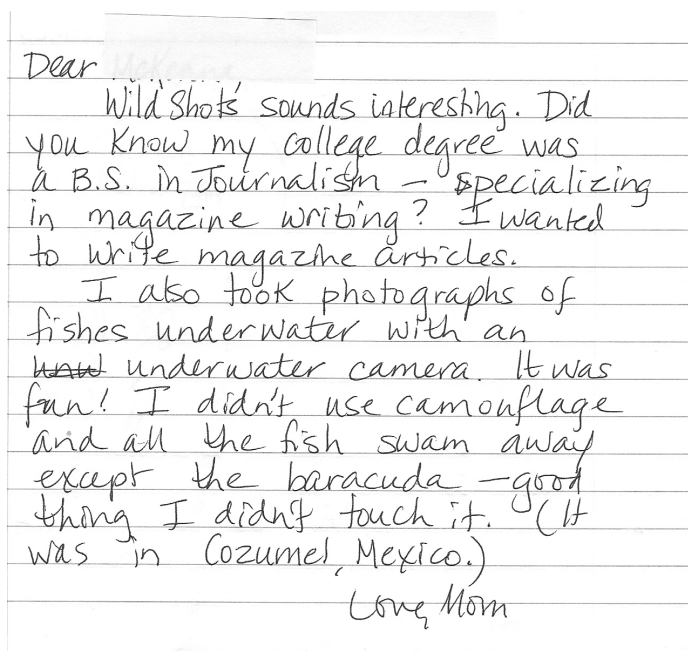


Figure 91. Ethan's parents struggle to understand his entry.

Sharing a Memory, Personal Experience, or Story

A favorite parent response was sharing a memory, personal experience, or telling a story (Figure 92). The students found these types of responses fascinating. What delighted parents and children alike was that these topics would likely not have come up if not for the journals. Many parents commented how Family Message Journals sparked conversations they would probably never thought to have otherwise. In the example below, Mallory describes the new reading story, *Wild Shots, They're My Life*, which profiles a wildlife photographer. Her mom replies that she was a journalism major in college. Mallory was flabbergasted by this news, as her mother is a stay-at-home mom. Mallory told the class, "I never knew my mom knew how to do anything but cook and clean. She could have been a real life photographer. But she is a mom instead."



Dear [redacted],

Wild Shots' sounds interesting. Did you know my college degree was a B.S. in Journalism - specializing in magazine writing? I wanted to write magazine articles.

I also took photographs of fishes underwater with an ~~new~~ underwater camera. It was fun! I didn't use camouflage and all the fish swam away except the baracuda - good thing I didn't touch it. (It was in Cozumel, Mexico.)

Love Mom

Figure 92. Family Message Journals led to Mallory discovering her mom was a journalism major in college.

Praising or Showing Affection

Parents used many opportunities to let their children know how much they love them and how proud they are of them (Figures 93 & 94). For a few of the children in my class, the Family Message Journal was the first time they were explicitly told they were loved. Other students were told on a regular basis they were appreciated. One student put his opinion this way, "I know my parents love me and I like it that they write it in my journal. I especially like to look back in my journal when I get in trouble or if they are mad at me for something. I look at the days when they told me how much they love me and it reminds me they are just mad at me for a little while, but they love me all the time."

Dear Alan,

Do You know what I am most thankful for? You! I am thankful to have three beautiful, smart, healthy children. Every night I thank God for you and your sister's. Every day is a beautiful gift and I'm thankful you are my son and can share my days.

Love you,
Mama

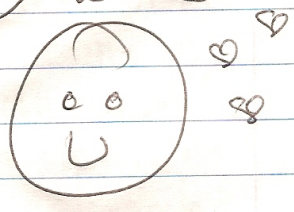
Figure 93. Alan's mom responds to his entry about what he is most thankful for.

11/10/07

Dear [REDACTED]

You are such a creative
and very magical storyteller!
I have always said and have
often said that you could do
anything because your mind is
such a beautiful thing! Being a
writer and/or author could be
something in the future that you
could consider! The potential
that is there for you - the
possibilities are endless! I
really like "Omega and
Stelbea" alot!

(rhymes with
Sagasewea!
(?)) Love



I
u

Mom

Figure 94. Kimberly's mom reacts to a creative writing story written by her daughter.

Giving Advice or Reminders

Giving advice is a gift of parents everywhere. Bubba the Betta's untimely death was a goldmine opportunity for moms and dads to share sympathy and offer sage advice about dealing with death (Figure 95).

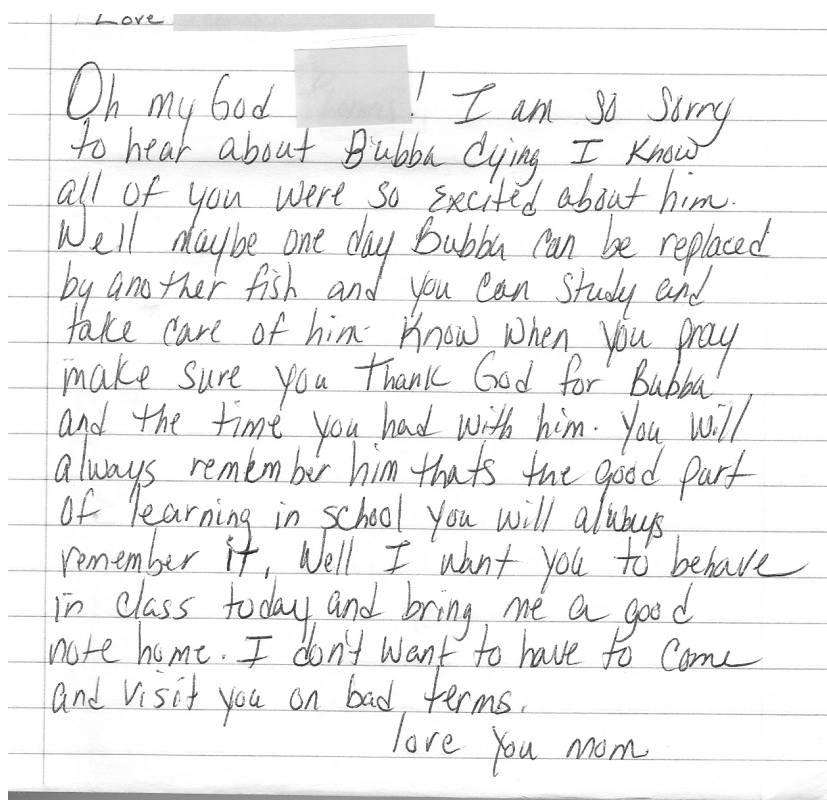


Figure 95. Taylor's mom shares sympathy upon Bubba's death.

Often, parents used the Family Message Journals to remind their children of academic responsibilities as well as upcoming events at home. Below are some examples of parental reminders.

You have a math test tomorrow. Don't forget your book.
 One more week until we go to Ohio!
 Don't forget about Girl Scouts tomorrow.
 Please don't forget your journal again. You left me hanging last night.

Scolding

One of the most surprising uses of the Family Message Journal was for parents to scold their children, usually about behavior (Figures 96 & 97). Unanticipated, this theme emerged in 14 of the 15 journals. Timothy's mother, especially, used his Family Message Journal as a daily reminder for him to remember what is most important in school. In the example below, Timothy explains the three branches of government. His last two lines refer to his behavior and asks his mother to "except my apolge." His mother, however, completely ignores his entry and immediately addresses a bad behavior note he brought home that day.

9-2-07

Dear Mom,

Today Jamie was on me so I pushed off of me.

My teacher thought I hit him.

Do you know there are 3 Governments

One name is Judicial

One name is Executive

One name is Legislative.

I'm sorry that it is bad.

Do you except my apolge.

P.S. I glad for what happend last night so I can sleep with you.

Love [REDACTED]

I have to you that you cannot
things like that. You are supposed to let
your teacher know. I am not happy
about today's report and I hope
the next one is not like this. You can
do much better than that. Now let's
talk about what you are learning. Do
you see that in the third grade you learn
more and more. Well it gets harder as
you go. The only way you will be able
to keep up is to stop playing and
pay attention. I will accept your
apology only if you don't do it again.
Now pay attention and do good today

Love mom

P.S. You still can't sleep with
me you're a big boy now.

Figure 96. Timothy's mother uses his Family Message Journal to scold him about his behavior.

Dear [redacted],

That trick is pretty cool. I have never seen that done before. Looks like you are learning alot of things to learn easier. I just signed your Weekly log, and I want you to control your talking in class Please. If you listen more you will learn more. I Love you and keep up the Good grades.

Love Dad

12-10-07

Figure 97. Ethan's dad gives a reminder to control talking in class.

Sharing Humor

Another unexpected category of parent replies was humor. Parents loved to make funny comments in the Family Message Journals. Even more surprising, it did not take long for students to recognize character traits in individual parents. A common request when it was time to read aloud parent responses was, "Let's let Hannah go first. Her mom is always so funny!" Indeed, after the class acquired Bubba the Betta, Hannah's mom wrote that she loved fish ... for dinner! She added that she would make an exception for Bubba and not eat him. However, she did want to name Bubba's successor Sushi, to the delight of the class.

Actually, Bubba was the object for much comedy in journals. The day the students reported that Bubba wanted to fight himself in the mirror, the humor was rampant:

Alan's dad: When they fight, do they wear boxing gloves?

Kimberly's mom: I bet Bubba died of embarrassment because he was afraid of his own reflection!

Miller's mom: Maybe Bubba looked in the mirror and thought he was having a bad hair day!

Families' Perspectives

Informed and Involved

As a result of Family Message Journals, all parents reported that they felt they were more informed about what their child was learning about in school. Rather than reading the same information in a weekly newsletter from the teacher, families felt more involved by communicating in writing directly with their child about the new concepts being learned.

Alan's mom described how her son would often answer "nothing" when asked what he learned at school. But, she said, "His journal would tell a different story. With the journals, we had something to talk about. If I was confused, I could ask about his writing and he elaborated."

Timothy's mother explained how Family Message Journals kept her informed. She liked that Timothy became very descriptive and that she could look forward to discussing what he wrote with him more in the evenings.

The journals kept me up to date with his daily schoolwork and allowed me to discuss what he worked on with him. The journals were a great part of the day and Timothy was very excited about them and enjoyed doing them every day. He always made sure we read the journals and discussed them. That was the best part of his day.

Ethan's parents loved the connection they felt when they participated in journals and really missed them when the class finished the project. Ethan's mom commented:

I miss it. I feel disconnected now. That was my favorite link to know what was going on in class. It helped us to follow along with what he was learning. With the journals, we always had an idea what he learned. Otherwise, if I asked Ethan, he always said “nothing” every time.

Kimberly’s mom agreed that she liked to know “exactly what was going on.”

With the Family Message Journals she said she knew what to ask Kimberly to elaborate on. Even if her daughter was not detailed in her entry, it was a springboard from which to start a conversation.

A Special Note about Dads

In her interview, Kimberly’s mom especially liked how her husband was able to play more of an active role in their daughter’s education. He worked until late at night and was often unable to see the children at all before their bedtime. She left her journal on her dad’s pillow each night so he would not forget his entry. Their Family Message Journal allowed Kimberly’s dad to participate in a very personal way. Kimberly’s mom described how she was the one who volunteered, helped with homework, and listened to the children talk about school. Her husband was only given the highlights or informed of problems or concerns by his wife long after the children were in bed. The Family Message Journal allowed Kimberly to communicate directly to her dad. Mom said, “Hearing it from her is more personal. They need that connection, too. Their relationship has really blossomed because of the journals.”

This notion was echoed by many other families, both case study families and families from the rest of the class. Ethan’s dad expressed his gratitude for the journals in a reply to his son (Figure 98), as well as in his interview. He loved having the special time with his son, especially when Ethan told him that when he read his dad’s response

the next day, “It’s like my parents are right there beside me when I’m at school, even when they’re not.”

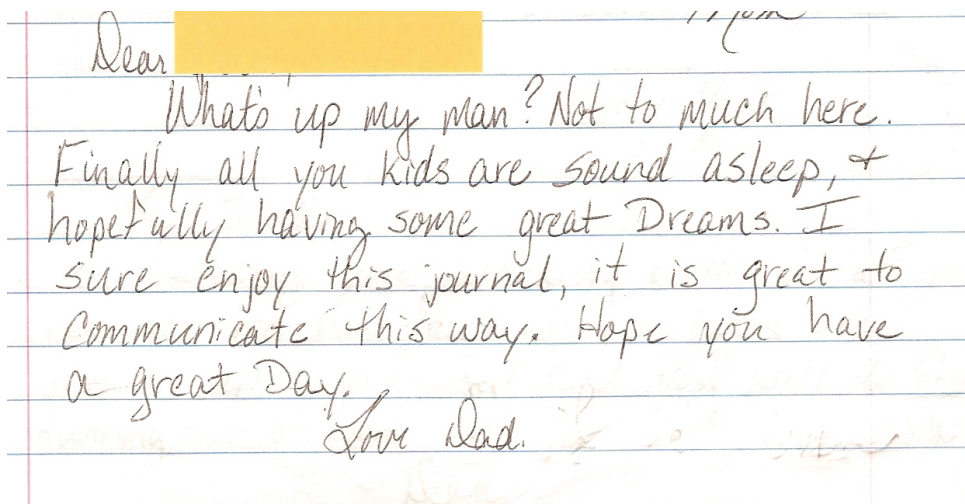


Figure 98. Ethan’s dad expresses his feelings about Family Message Journals.

For many students, third grade is the year they become mortified if their parents expressed Public Displays of Affection. The humiliation is multiplied if the affection is from a dad to a son. The boys in my class tell me that after a certain age, it is fine for a dad to show affection for daughters, but “a little creepy” if the same attention was paid to a son. For this reason, the boys in my class admitted that the journals brought back concrete love and affection from dads to sons.

Extended Family

Parents were not the only family members who participated in Family Message Journals. There were many grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, babysitters, friends of the family, and even one dog. Families really embraced the *family* aspect of the journals and involved as many family members as possible. Several students

even asked to take their Family Message Journals when they made special trips to visit relatives out of town. These students were especially excited to share their learning with those they have little contact with, and even more excited to share the responses of these relatives with the class.

Summary

Family participation was 100% of the entire class. Parental response rates among the 6 case study students ranged from 87% to 100%. The high rate of participation indicates the parents' dedication to their children and the value they place on the importance of writing. Parent replies served nine functions: express interest in a new concept, share new information, ask questions about a new concept, ask for clarification, share a memory or experience, praise or show affection, give advice or reminders, scold, or share humor. Families felt informed and involved as they participated in the journals. Parents had an idea about what their children were learning and often used the entries as springboards for conversation. Extended family members were able to be involved in students' education as well, which further motivated students to write for an authentic audience and purpose.

Evidence of Quality

Case study requires extensive verification (Stake, 1995). Stake emphasizes the importance of validity in a qualitative study by expanding on the two procedural concepts of triangulation and member checking. Triangulation for this study is illustrated by the Data Source Matrix. Member checking, according to Stake, is when "the actor is

requested to examine rough drafts of writing where the actions or words of the actor are featured ... The actor is asked to review the material for accuracy and palatability” (pp. 115-116). All families have been asked to review material relevant to each of them.

Summary of Findings

Though some of the case study students improved more than others, all 6 students’ writing ability improved. Handwriting and format were the most obvious elements that improved, but there was positive progression in all four domains. Timothy and Ethan showed the most dramatic improvement, while Dalton and Shaun still have a profound spelling weakness.

Family Message Journals were ideal for teaching writing across the curriculum. Students enjoyed the wide variety of writing topics and enjoyed explaining such a myriad of newly learned concepts to their parents. Students also discovered that they had difficulty explaining a new concept with clarity if they did not quite understand the concept themselves. This discovery led the students to revisit the content for deeper understanding so that they could explain it to their parents. The repetition of parental journal responses further reinforced the content of new concepts. Students were able to benefit from each of their classmates’ parents’ responses as well as their own.

Family Message Journals were a valuable tool for teaching communication skills to the case study students. They learned that clarity is imperative for communication and that communication is an ongoing two-way act and that they had an important responsibility for their part in the communicative process. Students discovered that

writing is a powerful form of communication, and were excited to write with a purpose, and for their audience.

Families were able to take an active role in their children's education through Family Message Journals. The high response rate indicates the value parents placed on the project. Families found that the journals benefitted them as much as the students, as they felt the home-school connection and felt more informed about what their child was learning. This knowledge allowed parents to assist their children with specific concepts, and kept them abreast of their child's progress on a daily basis. Extended family members were able to participate, increasing children's motivation for writing to an audience for a purpose. As an unexpected benefit, parents used the journal topics as springboards for other conversation, strengthening their relationship with their child.

The next section, chapter 5, provides a summary of the study, conclusions, and their connection to current literature. This chapter also offers new findings, recommendations, and reflection.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTION

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the study and important conclusions drawn from the data presented in chapter 4. It provides an interpretation of the findings and their relationship to research literature. Unexpected results will be reported and discussed. Implications for social change, recommendations for action and further study will be followed by the researcher's reflection.

Figure 99 offers a student's final Family Message Journal entry and his mother's response. This student's feelings toward journals and his mother's reply were the norm rather than the exception.

Dear Mom,
 What Journals Have Meant
 To Me

You have helped me very much. I hope we will get an A+ for a grade. You have responded to every journal entry I have wrote to you. I really respecte that. I really liked doing this with you and I hope you liked it to. We have both really achieved something this year. I know it is very hard to respond to my entrys because you are in school but you are still doing it and that is very important to me.

Love

Dear [Redacted]

I am so glad that this journal has helped you. I am even more glad that you have enjoyed it. I really hope that we get an A+ on it too! It is great that you respect me, I respect you too.

I have enjoyed writing in your journal, it's been so much fun.

I know how much it meant to you, it meant a lot to me too.

I know sometimes mom is really busy, but I will always make

time for you. You, Jacob, and Makynzie will always be

the most important thing to me. This journal has helped

me to keep up with what's

going on at school with you.

You don't always tell me

about your day even when I ask, so it was nice to be

able to read about it. I also

learned a lot about you from your journal. I learned about

things that interest you, I learned how well you can write, and I

learned what you were studying.

You taught me so much! There are always new things to learn

even when you are an adult. You

taught me lots of things I
 didn't know everything
 about volcanoes or bubblegum.
 This has been a great experience
 for us both. I am very proud
 of all you have accomplished
 this year. You're growing up too
 fast! It's time for fourth grade.
 I Love You Very Much!!

Love,
 MOM

Figure 99. A culminating student entry and parent response.

Summary of Study

Problem

Lack of time for writing instruction is one consequence of the growing curricula facing teachers (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Writing skills are declining, teachers are finding little or no time to include writing instruction, and parental involvement remains weak (National Writing Commission). Schools need parents more than ever before (Marzano, 2003). Although studies over the last thirty years identified a strong link between parent involvement in school and increased student achievement, enhanced self-esteem, improved behavior, and better school attendance, family involvement in U.S. schools remains minimal (Comer, 2005; Corday & Wilson, 2004; Mapp, 1997). Family Message Journals may be a strategy to address these dilemmas.

The problem is there is little research combining the two strategies of journal writing with parental involvement. Wollman-Bonilla (2000) conducted the first formal, published research on these particular journals. A few small studies have since surfaced (Canfield Inquiry Projects, 2004; Horton, as cited in Moore, 2004). However, most data has been gathered from kindergarten, first-, or second-grade students. As a result, there is a need for further research to explore how journals can be used as an effective strategy for teaching writing across the curriculum while utilizing parental participation. More specifically, there is little information on implementing Family Message Journals with older students.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how Family Message Journals, with parent participation, can affect students' writing ability. There is little research combining these two powerful strategies. This study sought to contribute to the existing information and to expand upon ways to use Family Message Journals to improve writing skills in third-grade students.

Research Questions

The central question to be explored in this study was: Can writing instruction through Family Message Journals affect third-grade students' writing ability?

The study will also seek to answer the following subsidiary questions:

1. What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum?

2. What is the affectt of utilizing Family Message Journals as a tool for improving written communication skills in third grade students?
3. What is the affectt of utilizing Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education?

Methodology

The basic premise of this study was to combine adequate time allotted for writing instruction across the curriculum, journal writing, and parental involvement. The combination of these three tools makes up the concept of Family Message Journals. The researcher chose to conduct a qualitative study because a rich, descriptive narrative would provide a better means of exploring the impact of Family Message Journals than reporting quantitative test scores.

The researcher chose to conduct a case study. The case was identified as the teacher researcher's classroom and its use of Family Message Journals as a tool for writing instruction. The case was bounded by time (four months) and place (a single classroom). Extensive, multiple sources of information were used in data collection to provide a detailed picture of the effectiveness of the strategy, as characteristic of a case study. These sources of information included studying background information of the case study students, studying the journals as artifacts, conducting open-ended interviews with both student participants and their parents, and utilizing notes from a Researcher's Reflective Journal.

Creswell (1998) advocated using the term 'verification' rather than 'validity' since "verification underscores qualitative research as a distinct approach" (p. 201).

Strategies used for verification include triangulation, member checking, bias clarification, and peer debriefing.

The entire class participated in Family Message Journals, as it was required as part of language arts, but emphasis was placed on the 6 case study students. Case study participants included 6 students from the researcher's third-grade class in a rural county in south central Georgia and their parents. They were selected from the class of 15 students to reflect the demographics and ability levels in the class.

Data was generated from the journal entries written by students and their parents' responses during a 4-month period. The Family Message Journals were artifacts collected as unobtrusive data. This data was triangulated with data from unstructured, open-ended interviews with the 6 case study students and at least one family member, student background information, the Parents' Homework, and the Researcher's Reflective Journal. Data was organized in a data source matrix.

To analyze journal entry data, one entry for each week of the 16-week data collection period was chosen, scanned, and typed into Microsoft Word 2007 exactly as written. Each entry was analyzed and coded according to an adaptation of the Georgia Writing Assessment Rubric. Parent responses were scanned and coded according to the nature of the message to develop themes. Student and parent interviews were conducted and coded according to the research question they answered. A reflective journal was kept to record anecdotal incidents and thoughts and perceptions of the researcher. These entries were coded according to the research question they addressed and triangulated along with other data to add depth to the study. Background information was available for extraneous information. A data source matrix was created using Microsoft Excel

2007, allowing the researcher to triangulate all data to determine emerging themes. For this qualitative case study, inductive analysis was used. According to Mills (2002), “Inductive analysis is a search for patterns of meaning and data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made” (p. 99). Inductive analysis was appropriate for this case study because the researcher began with a mass of qualitative data from multiple sources, coded, and triangulated all data into meaningful themes.

Major Findings

Though some of the case study students progressed more dramatically than others, all 6 students’ writing ability improved. Handwriting and format were the most obvious elements that improved, but there was positive progression in all four domains (conventions, ideas, organization, and style). Students’ ability to explain newly learned content improved progressively throughout the project. Learning to include more supporting details, better organization of content, and refining clarity all improved for each of the case study students. Because the Family Message Journals documented concrete progress (or lack of progress) steadily over a period of time, assessment was made more logical. Areas for improvement were made more obvious. Therefore, students could more specifically focus on elements needing the most attention.

Family Message Journals were ideal for teaching writing across the curriculum. Students wrote on a wide variety of writing topics and explained a myriad of newly learned concepts to their parents. Students also discovered that they had difficulty explaining a new concept with clarity if they did not quite understand the concept themselves. This discovery led the students to revisit the content for deeper

understanding so that they could explain it to their parents. The repetition of parental journal responses further reinforced the content of new concepts. Students were able to benefit from each of their classmates' parents' responses as well as their own.

Family Message Journals were a valuable tool for teaching communication skills to the case study students. They learned that clarity is imperative for communication and that communication is an ongoing two-way act and that they had an important responsibility for their part in the communicative process. Students discovered that writing is a powerful form of communication, and were excited to write with a purpose, and for their audience.

Families were able to take an active role in their children's education through Family Message Journals. Families found that the journals benefitted them as much as the students, as they appreciated the home-school connection and felt more informed about what their child was learning. This knowledge allowed parents to assist their children with specific concepts, and kept them abreast of their child's progress on a daily basis. Extended family members were able to participate, increasing children's motivation for writing to an audience for a purpose. As an unexpected benefit, parents used the journal topics as springboards for other conversation, strengthening their relationship with their child.

Interpretation of Findings

Through Family Message Journals, students may discover the importance of their words and the power of their voices. Several conclusions were derived after conducting this study and will be discussed with each research question.

Central Research Question: How can writing instruction through Family Message Journals impact third graders' writing ability?

Conclusions and Literature Connection

Family Message Journals can positively affect third-grade students' writing ability. With ample time for writing, frequent opportunities for practice, and an authentic audience and purpose for motivation, third-grade students' writing ability will likely improve.

The increased writing time appears to be an important factor for writing improvement. Writing four times per week gave students the opportunity and time to practice their developing skills. This extra time also afforded students the repetition needed for retention. Researchers declared that if children are to become better writers, they must be given ample opportunity to practice the craft (Graves, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Nagin (2006) agreed, "Learning to write requires frequent, supportive practice" (p. 12). Graves advocated allowing a minimum of three days a week for writing, but suggested that four or five are better. Family Message Journals are a sensible way to fit four days of writing into a crammed curriculum.

Another concluding factor influencing students' writing improvement was simply their desire to please their audience. As students wrote in their Family Message Journals, they were keenly aware that their parents were going to be reading their entries. My students craved their parents' approval and pride; therefore, students strived to make their entries interesting and with as few errors as possible. After all, they were not writing for a grade, they were writing for their *parents!* In her study with first-graders,

Wollman-Bonilla (2000) also found that when students wrote journal entries for an authentic audience, they worked through their struggles to write a good entry. Other researchers agree that students take more care in their writing when writing for a real audience (Calkins, 1994; Atwell; 1998, Graves; 2003, Nagin; 2006).

New Findings

Previous studies regarding Family Message Journals have been conducted only on younger students. Wollman-Bonilla (2000) conducted her study with first-graders. Horton (2004) did more informal research on kindergartners, and the Canfield Writing Project (2004) was conducted in one teacher's first- and second-grade split classroom. I found that the third-graders' connection with their parents seemed stronger than with younger students. The third-graders were able to communicate with their parents on a more mature level, and therefore introduce subjects in their journals that younger students would not likely bring up. For example, Ethan brought up his feelings about the family's move down South; Timothy discussed his negative behavior and asked for forgiveness; he also asked his mom if the family could all sit down for dinner so they could talk and be together; Dalton invoked his resentment of his mother's long hours at work (and how it infringed on his birthday party).

The more mature third-graders were able to give their entries more clarity and a stronger voice than younger students are developmentally able to do. Consequently, Family Message Journals are able to bring forth a new purpose for older students that younger children may not be ready for.

Subsidiary Question 1: What is the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals to teach writing across the curriculum?

Conclusions and Literature Connection

Teachers can use Family Message Journals as a tool for writing instruction across the curriculum. Time is a necessity for good writing instruction, and therefore good writing. State school systems, in their relentless attempt to increase achievement, make teachers feel pressured to ensure students' success (Ghezzi, 2002). Accomplishing this goal requires an inordinate amount of time spent for reading and math mastery at the expense of other subjects (Black, 2002), and writing is often the first to go. Wollman-Bonilla (2000) suggested that writing across the curriculum is one way to find time for writing.

Writing across the curriculum strengthens understanding of concepts in the content areas. My students learned that if they struggled to explain a new concept to their parents, then they needed to revisit the content themselves for better understanding. Once the students were able to explain the concept in their Family Message Journal entry, they knew they truly understood. An added bonus, when students read journal entries aloud, I could check for their understanding as well. On several occasions, students were incorrect in some of their explanations; when classmates heard the entries, they were able to constructively correct the misconception.

Research supports these findings. A recent study of 54 children called *Learning by Explaining: Does It Matter If Mom Is Listening?* was conducted at Vanderbilt University. The team of researchers found that 4- and 5-year-olds who explained concepts to their mothers before taking a test scored correctly on 75% of the reasoning

questions. Children who explained the concepts to themselves prior to the test scored 72%, but the children who did not explain the concepts at all scored only 42% correct (Rittle-Johnson, B. et al., 2007)

New Findings

Even when taking advantage of time by writing across the curriculum, finding even a few minutes to write was still challenging. During the course of the study, I experimented with several different schedules before I found the niche of time I needed for journal writing and response reading. Once I found a comfortable time, our routine flourished. No matter how tight a schedule, most every teacher can creatively find ten minutes twice a day (one for writing, one for reading the previous night's response).

Unlike previous studies conducted with younger students, third-graders were able to explain new concepts to their parents using higher order thinking skills. Not all, but many students were critical and creative thinkers, analyzing and synthesizing information. Many evaluated information and explained their opinions to their families. In this regard, Family Message Journals are more than a journal, but a tool for higher levels of thinking and reflection for an audience. According to Nagin (2006):

An effective writing assignment does more than ask students to write about what they have read or experienced. It engages students in a series of cognitive processes, such as reflection, analysis, and synthesis, so that they are required to transform the information from the reading material or other sources in order to complete the writing assignment. (p. 47)

Of course, these magical moments did not happen every day or for every child, but they did occur more often than if students had fewer opportunities to write.

Subsidiary Question 2: What is the impact of utilizing Family Message Journals as a tool for improving communication skills in third grade students?

Conclusions and Literature Connection

Family Message Journals enabled the third-grade case study students, as well as the rest of the class, to improve communication skills. Students learned valuable lessons that enhance their ability to communicate successfully: clarity is important; communication is two-way; communication can take different forms; communication takes practice; and communication is powerful. The major conclusion regarding communication derived as a result of this study is that an authentic audience with real purpose was the key to improving communication. Without the presence of family participation, students would not have had the opportunity to practice real world communication skills.

From current literature, many researchers recommend that when it comes to writing, make it real (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; The Commission, 2003; Graves, 2003; Lamme, et al., 2002; Nagin, 2006; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). In the first study regarding Family Message Journals, Wollman-Bonilla found that an authentic audience was critical to the success of the journals. In fact, in her initial email granting permission to adapt her coding, Wollman-Bonilla gave the advice to “keep in the forefront the importance of writing for a purpose and audience ... that, in my opinion, is why so much school writing is so dismal – there is no purpose or audience other than the teacher” (from personal email, July 3, 2007). Nagin also reported, “An effective assignment goes beyond the use of a “pretend” audience and offers the student a genuine opportunity to communicate to a real audience” (p. 48).

New Findings

Even though parent responses did not always model perfect spelling, grammar, or mechanics, these imperfections did not hinder student learning. Conversely, these challenges presented students with opportunities to practice these skills. Students reveled in their parents' mistakes, gleeful that their parents were not perfect, and beaming with newfound self-efficacy. Previous studies conducted with younger participants (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000; Horton, 2004; Canfield Inquiry Project, 2004) may not be developmentally ready for this added element, but the older third graders appeared to benefit.

Family Message Journals with third-graders may produce more thought-provoking communication than with younger students. Rather than each journal entry being able to stand alone, many of the third-graders' conversations with their families spanned for more than one or two days. Some students continued written conversations back and forth for days through postscripts. Similarly, parents asked academic questions that provoked students to think at higher levels (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and received thoughtful answers from their children. Often, the class would research parental inquiries so that all classmates benefitted from the learned information. This practice may not have been as prevalent in the studies with younger students.

Parents used the Family Message Journals as a communication tool of their own. For example, when Timothy was absent for several days in the hospital, he read an entry from his mother to the class upon his return. Her entry explained her son's absence and even taught a mini-lesson on tonsillitis. Other parents wrote entries with "secret" messages for the teacher, such as, "Did you tell Mrs. McCann you didn't study for your

test?” or “You are very fortunate to have Mrs. McCann for your teacher. You must mind her and give her your full attention and respect. Did you apologize for your behavior yesterday?” Parents knew that, as the teacher, I never participated by writing in the journals myself, but they knew I was listening as students read their responses. In this way, the parents and I formed a team, partners with a common goal of raising and educating their children together. This partnership resulted in my best year ever in terms of parental support. Parents felt “included” in what was going on in our classroom. When we finished writing in journals before Christmas, many parents reported feeling disconnected and “lost” without the journals. I also felt a similar disconnection with parents.

Subsidiary Question 3: What is the affect of utilizing Family Message Journals as a meaningful way for parents to be involved in their child's education?

Conclusions and Literature Connection

Family Message Journals allowed parents to be meaningfully involved in their child's education. Christie (2005) asserted, “There's parent involvement and then there's parent involvement” (p. 645). Volunteering by making and organizing things is helpful, but there are other levels at which parent involvement may be more significant. Participating in Family Message Journals offers such an opportunity. Parental school involvement has a positive influence on academics (Hill & Taylor, 2004) and the link between supportive parental involvement and children's early literacy is considered to be quite strong (Strickland, 2004).

An impressive 100% of the case study parents, as well as 100% of the rest of the third-grade class and all of their families participated in Family Message Journals. Response rates for the 51 entries ranged from 87% to 100% among the 6 case study families. The high rate of participation and response to their children's journal entries indicates the families' dedication to their children and the value they placed on the importance of writing. All case study parents reported in their interviews that their participation was at least partly driven by their children's enthusiasm for the Family Message Journals.

Participating in Family Message Journals allowed families to feel valued and appreciated for their role as a partner with the teacher. Participation was sustained because of their children's continuing improvement in writing ability, their desire to feel informed about, and connected to, what was being learned in the classroom, and their child's enthusiasm for the Family Message Journals.

New Findings

Parents of these older children were just as willing to participate in Family Message Journals as the parents of younger students in previous studies. Parental school involvement is thought to decline as children get older (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). The high rate of participation and response in this study indicated that these parents of older students are willing to participate. Interviews revealed that parents felt Family Message Journals were not a chore, but meaningful, yet practical, participation that seemed to make a difference and was important to their child.

Parent responses allowed children to learn— not only from their own families — but from everybody else's as well. As students listened to classmates' parent replies, they

learned new information, were taught new vocabulary, and were exposed to vicarious experiences from 14 other families on a daily basis. Students enjoyed “getting to know” the families of their classmates and their cultures, values, and traditions. One parent commented about how her son bonded with his classmates as he learned to appreciate and respect their similarities and differences. Students also began to anticipate the tone of some family responses. For example, a recurring comment was, “Let’s start with Hallie’s mom. She’s always so funny!”

Family Message Journals served a wake up call for some parents who did not realize how weak (or how strong) their child’s writing skills were. One parent commented that she had no idea her son’s spelling needed such remediation until she saw on a daily basis how weak his spelling was with basic sight words. Another parent marveled at her daughter’s creativity and vocabulary. Neither would have been as informed had they not been exposed to their child’s writing on a daily basis.

Unlike similar studies conducted with kindergarten through second-graders, parents of these third-grade students enjoyed participation for yet another reason – reconnecting with their older child. In interviews, parents repeatedly reported that Family Message Journals allowed them to get to know the person their child was becoming. One mom added that as her son got older, it was important to her to keep the lines of communication open. “We want him to always be able to come to us, and this journal has helped him understand it’s still okay to do that, even as he gets older. The communication will hopefully come in handy as he heads toward middle school!”

Unexpected Outcomes

When I began the exploration of Family Message Journals, its affect on students' writing ability was my central question because I, the researcher, deemed it the most significant aspect to be studied. The most unexpected conclusion reached as a result of this study was that it was *not*. The students' writing did improve and the project was a popular and successful venture; however, almost as soon as the project began, so many other unexpected side effects appeared: students had more respect for each other and their differences as they became better acquainted with classmates' families; students' classroom behavior improved; parents bonded with children; children learned fascinating tidbits about their parents that they may never have discovered otherwise; teacher and parents became partners in their child's lives, both academic and otherwise; children read (and treasured) tangible evidence of praise, love, and affection that may never have been exposed by spoken language, but felt safe to unveil in print.

Below is a list of surprises that I kept during the course of the study. A few items from the list will then be highlighted.

1. Increased motivation to write.
2. More positive attitude about writing assignments.
3. Assessment made easy.
4. Increased self-efficacy.
5. Better classroom behavior.
6. Parental praise for journals.
7. Best "parent year" in 17 years of teaching experience.
8. Dads able to participate in a meaningful way.

9. Extended family members able to participate.
10. Great tool for standardized testing review.
11. Surprising humor shared by parents.
12. Class bonding and new mutual respect for each other.
13. Parents using Family Message Journals as their own communication tool.

Increased Motivation to Write

I suspected that most of the students would enjoy Family Message Journals, but the extent of their excitement baffled me. I have never before witnessed students congregating in a corner of the room before homeroom to compare writing homework. I have never had students pester me all day asking when journal time was. I have never seen students actually upset on the rare occasion we were not able to write.

The motivation to write in Family Message Journals spilled over into other writing assignments as well. Students were suddenly more willing to complete the more mundane writing tasks. Writing was now something fun, and the connotation of a writing assignment had been transformed from negative to positive. Students commented that because they practiced writing so often, it did not seem as difficult a task. Before, they would sit and stare at an intimidating blank sheet of paper; now they have learned the ease of selecting a topic and developing details.

Assessment Made Easy

Family Message Journals provide tangible evidence from a large number of writing samples allowing teachers an immediate and logical method of assessment. Nagin (2006) explained these implications for assessment, “Multiple samples of student

work, each written for a distinct audience and purpose, can give a much deeper sense of a writer's abilities and developmental needs" (p. 78).

When both students and parents reviewed the journals, the progression of growth in writing ability was immediately obvious. The Family Message Journals can be especially helpful during parent conferences. Parents appreciate tangible evidence of their child's progress, or lack thereof. Family Message Journals may be more parent friendly than test data, which can be vague, confusing, or even intimidating for parents. As an added bonus, the natural progression of the journals allows the students themselves to track their own growth in writing ability and gain self-efficacy along with the progress.

Parental Praise for Family Message Journals

I anticipated that parents would appreciate their child's use of the Family Message Journal to keep them informed about the concepts being studied. However, none of us (parents, students, or even I) realized how important the Family Message Journal was as a communication tool until we stopped journals at Christmas. Several families commented that they felt "disconnected" from school and they no longer felt they were a part of a home-school relationship. Parents also said they felt they had lost a bond they had created with their child. Many families wrote notes asking when journals would resume.

Two families wrote notes thanking me for the experience. One mom shared how her teen daughter was mum about every aspect of her life. Then she had the idea of Family Message Journals for her entire family. Now, in her journal, she opens up about everything. This mom also said her marriage had even strengthened by the written correspondence between her and her husband.

Another mom wrote me a note saying she is convinced the Family Message Journal helped control her son's behavior. When he had the daily communication from his family, his behavior was much better than either before or after journals. I had already noticed the same phenomena about my class as a whole.

One surprise was how parents used the Family Message Journals to their own advantage. Besides responding to their children about the lesson concept being addressed in their child's entry, parents routinely used the journals for:

1. Reminders (usually about behavior or extracurricular activities)
2. Advice
3. Scolding
4. Praise and affection
5. Teacher support
6. Humor and teasing

Implications for Social Change

“Writing should no longer be ‘the silent R’ of learning or the poor cousin of reading” (Nagin, 2006, p. 71). With many states under the pressure of high stakes testing, the curriculum focus is often reading and math. Writing has been increasingly neglected (Christopher et al., 2000; National Commission on Writing, 2003; Martin et al., 2005). Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, agreed, “While trying to improve math, science, and technology in our schools, we’ve neglected writing (College Board Press Release, 2004).

The American workforce sees the consequences of this neglect. The National Commission on Writing reported that corporations in the United States spend several billion dollars a year improving writing among employees (College Board Press Release, 2004). In the 2005 report, the Commission asserted that writing deficiency among state employees not only hinders state governments' effectiveness and efficiency, the cost to improve employees' writing skills far exceeds their budgets (The Commission, 2005, p. 6). To help combat this growing problem, The National Commission on Writing (2003) suggested, "assigning writing across the curriculum, at least doubling the time students spend on writing, and investing in research to aid both students and teachers in writing instruction" (p. 35).

Family Message Journals utilize all of The Commission's suggestions. Continued use of the Family Message Journals yields tangible improvements in students' writing ability and communication skills; it allows students to write across the curriculum; it allows parents to be a part of their child's education.

This study may be beneficial for curriculum directors and teachers who want to include meaningful writing instruction without compromising time in content areas. Teachers who routinely incorporate Family Message Journals into their curriculum may send their students to the next grade more prepared, more confident, and with a more positive attitude for writing. Ideally, these attributes would build and follow these students into the workforce.

Recommendations for Action

This study explored the use of Family Message Journals with third graders, focusing more on reflection and writing instruction across the curriculum. Family

Message Journals may be used by teachers of any grade level, any subject area, and by students of all academic abilities. Any family may participate in family responses, regardless of socioeconomic status or level of literacy. Children do not care how well their parents write, only that they write *something*. Language barriers may even be overcome by allowing families to communicate in their native language. Flexibility of Family Message Journals allows any responsible adult to respond if family members cannot or choose not to. Flexibility also allows the adult to respond briefly and at a time most convenient. With Family Message Journals, parents may be involved in their child's education regardless of work hours.

Family Message Journals may be implemented by anyone at any age level and any academic ability. The benefits will vary with the age group. Family Message Journals may be a vessel through which the youngest of students first discover the joys of reading and writing. Older elementary students can keep their parents informed while they understand new concepts. Middle schoolers can strengthen their relationship with parents as they struggle through adolescence. High school students may realize they are never too old to communicate with their parents and that their parents still want to be involved in their education.

Dissemination of Information

Our school is currently creating a new Five-Year Strategic Plan. Increased parental involvement has been highlighted as an area for improvement. Family Message Journals will be presented to the School Improvement Team as a method of increasing

parental involvement with all families. I will also present findings regarding Family Message Journals before our local Board of Education and superintendent.

Recommendations for Further Study

This qualitative case study was bound by the researcher's third-grade classroom. Case study participants included 6 students of the 15 class members in this rural west central Georgia elementary school. The study was bound by 4 months of data collection. Further study should utilize more participants in multiple classrooms. The data collection period should continue for an entire school year.

Furthermore, future studies should include a more diverse population. The researcher's school demographics are 82% White, 11% Black, only .04% Mixed and .02% Hispanic. There are no Asian students at all.

Further study should be conducted with middle school and high school students. Research literature reported that many parents of these older students are no less willing to be involved than when their students were in elementary school. However, as their children enter middle and high school, they are unsure what role they could play and are reluctant to ask (Powell, 1989). A study implementing Family Message Journals with middle and high school participants would offer a unique and interesting contribution to writing research and parental involvement with older students.

More study should be focused on illiterate and non-English speaking parents. While I did not encounter either of these variables in my study, inevitably, these issues will arise.

My students enjoyed writing in the traditional composition books, as they looked forward to their journal becoming a treasured possession to share with others someday. However, with the introduction of innovative technology in the classroom, research could be conducted on Family Message Journals in the form of a blog rather than in a composition book. This option of blogging would be of particular interest to an educator of students with fine motor skill deficiencies.

Finally, one recommendation for further study would be to conduct a quantitative or mixed methods research study to compare reading and language standardized test scores of students from the previous year to the next grade level's scores after teaching writing through Family Message Journals.

Researcher's Reflection

Researcher Bias or Preconceived Ideas

“Qualitative inquiry is subjective,” declared Stake (1995, p. 45). He explained that the subjectivity is not a downfall of qualitative research “needing to be eliminated, but as an essential element of understanding” (Stake, p. 45). Beginning Family Message Journals, as a researcher, the only preconceived ideas I had were positive hopes that my students and their parents would be willing to participate in the journal project.

As a teacher, my only bias was in persuading my students and their parents to share my excitement regarding Family Message Journals, just as I would whether or not I were conducting a study on the concept. For the project to be a successful classroom tool, as a teacher, I knew I needed both students and parents to *want* be a team, to understand the academic purpose of the journals, and to share the desire to make it work.

My initial parents letter was meant to do just that – educate the parents on the importance of their role as their child’s partner. Any teacher, however, must do the same when embarking on something new and soliciting help.

Possible Effects of Researcher on Participants

I can only hope I had an effect on my students. When I introduced the concept of Family Message Journals to my class, I was their teacher first, and researcher second. There should not be a single person teaching students who does not have a goal of affecting their students. The day I first introduced the journals, my students could sense my sincere excitement. A good teacher prays that the students embrace the new concept and share the excitement. A good teacher is passionate about teaching and should have an effect on the students.

A researcher, however, knows that protocol should be standardized if others are to replicate the study. Stake (1995), however, argued:

Researchers are encouraged to include their own personal perspectives in the interpretation. The way the case and the researcher interact is presumed unique and not necessarily reproducible for other cases and researchers. The quality and utility of the research is not based on its reproducibility but on whether or not the meanings generated, by the researcher or the reader, are valued. Thus, a personal valuing of the work is expected. (p. 135)

Ideally, every teacher introducing Family Message Journals, or any other new concept, should be just as excited and hope their students embrace it.

Changes in Thinking as a Result of Study

Family Message Journals forced me to take a serious, objective look at my own teaching style. I immediately realized that these journals made me more accountable regarding my responsibility for my students’ learning. Early into the project, I realized at

the end of one day that I had not taught the children anything new that they could write in their journals. Most every concept throughout the day had been an extension of the day before. This realization was an eye-opener for me in that my students *should* and *must* end each day having learned something new and exciting to be able to explain that concept to their parents. My teaching became more motivating and more rewarding.

Concluding Statement

This researcher began the journey to discover what emerged from exploring Family Message Journals. I hoped the project would conclude that utilizing Family Message Journals would have a positive effect on my students' writing ability. I was surprised by the incredible side effects of the journals. I had no idea how much I would be emotionally moved by the love and devotion of the parents. I was surprised by how touched I was by reading a child's postscript asking if the family could all sit down for dinner at the table together. I had no idea how much our class would bond as sort of our own family as we shared and laughed at entries and responses together. I was grateful for the extra benefit of parental support and how, through the Family Message Journals, they communicated to their children the notion that they backed the teacher completely. Family Message Journals are deceptively simple. They are easily implemented, practical, yet yield a myriad of benefits, both affective and academic. Meaningful involvement of families in this positive experience is a bonus.

I now understand why Stake (1995, p. 136) declared, "Finishing a case study is the consummation of a work of art."

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APPENDIX A: GEORGIA WRITING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

(Georgia Department of Education, 2006)

Georgia Grade 3 Writing Assessment: Scoring Rubric
INFORMATIONAL WRITING

Domain 1: Ideas - The degree to which the writer establishes a focus and develops the main points with examples, facts, anecdotes, and details.			
Component	Does Not Meet Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
Focus	Little or no evidence of focus, purpose, or point of view	Generally consistent focus; some evidence of a purpose and point of view	Sustained focus, purpose, and point of view
Supporting Details	Examples and details are limited and may be irrelevant	Includes some relevant examples, facts, anecdotes, and/or details	Relevant examples, facts, anecdotes, and details are used throughout the paper
Use of Resources	Little or no use of resources; may copy text from source materials	Some evidence of information from source materials	Appropriate use of resources; may paraphrase relevant information from source materials
Development/Completeness	Insufficient information to explain the topic	Sufficient information to explain the topic	Complete information; the topic is well developed

Domain 2: Organization - The degree to which the ideas are arranged in a clear order with an introduction, body, and conclusion.			
Component	Does Not Meet Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
Organizational Pattern (Introduction, body, conclusion)	Little or no evidence of an organizational pattern	Contains an introduction, body, and conclusion; one part of the paper may not be as strong as the others	Clear and appropriate organizational pattern with a strong introduction, body, and conclusion
Grouping of Ideas	Ideas are not arranged in a meaningful order	Related ideas are generally grouped together	Related ideas are consistently grouped together; may use specific strategies (e.g., questions and answers, cause and effect, similarity and difference)
Transitions	Little or no evidence of transitions	Transitions are used but may not be varied	Varied transitional elements link parts of the paper

Domain 3: Style - The degree to which the writer controls language to capture the reader's interest.			
Component	Does Not Meet Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
Word Choice	Language is simple, repetitive, or imprecise; little or no interesting language	A mixture of simple, ordinary language and interesting language (e.g., descriptive language, technical vocabulary, sensory details)	Sustained use of interesting language (e.g., descriptive language, technical vocabulary, sensory details)
Audience Awareness	Little or no awareness of audience	Some attention to the audience; some sense of the writer's voice	Attention to the audience in the introduction, body, and conclusion; writer's voice is clear and appropriate

**Georgia Grade 3 Writing Assessment: Scoring Rubric
NARRATIVE WRITING**

Domain 1: Ideas - The degree to which the writer establishes a focus and develops the main points with examples, facts, anecdotes, and details.

Component	Does Not Meet Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
Focus	Little or no evidence of focus, purpose, or point of view	Generally consistent focus; some evidence of a purpose and point of view	Sustained focus on the narrative purpose; consistent point of view
Supporting Details	Details and descriptions are limited and may be irrelevant	Includes some relevant details and descriptions	Relevant details and descriptions are included throughout the paper
Character Development	Character(s) are named or listed rather than developed	Begins to develop main character(s) through action and dialogue	Develops main character(s) through action, dialogue, and/or description
Development/Completeness	Insufficient information to tell a story	Sufficient information to tell a story	Complete information; the events of the story are well developed

Domain 2: Organization - The degree to which the ideas are arranged in a clear order with a beginning, middle, and end.

Component	Does Not Meet Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
Organizational Pattern (Beginning, Middle, End)	Little or no evidence of an organizational pattern	Contains a beginning, middle, and end; one part of the paper may not be as strong as the others	Clear narrative organizational pattern with a strong beginning, middle, and end
Chronological Sequence of Ideas	Little or no evidence of sequencing	Ideas are generally presented in a chronological sequence	Chronological sequencing of ideas within and across parts of the paper
Transitions	Little or no evidence of transitions	Transitions are used but may not be varied	Transitions are used consistently and effectively throughout the paper

Domain 3: Style - The degree to which the writer controls language to capture the reader's interest.

Component	Does Not Meet Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
Word Choice	Language is simple, repetitive, or imprecise; little or no interesting language	A mixture of simple, ordinary language and interesting language (e.g., descriptive language, sensory details, strong verbs)	Sustained use of interesting language (e.g., descriptive language, sensory details, strong verbs)
Audience Awareness	Little or no awareness of audience	Some attention to the audience; some sense of the writer's voice	Attention to the audience in the beginning, middle, and end; writer's voice is clear and appropriate

Georgia Grade 3 Writing Assessment: Scoring Rubric
CONVENTIONS
 All Genres

Domain 4: Conventions - The degree to which the writer demonstrates control of Sentence Formation, Usage, and Mechanics.			
Component	Element	Does Not Meet Standard	Meets Standard
Sentence Formation	Clarity and Correctness	More incorrect and unclear sentences than correct, clear sentences	Majority of clear and correct sentences
	Complexity	Little or no variation in sentence structure	Some variation in sentence structure
	Subject/Verb agreement	Frequent and severe agreement mistakes	Agreement is generally correct with some mistakes
Usage	Noun Forms (singular, plural, possessives)	Frequent mistakes in noun forms	Majority of correct noun forms with occasional mistakes
	Personal and Possessive Pronouns	Frequent mistakes using personal and possessive pronouns	Generally correct personal and possessive pronouns with only occasional mistakes
	Spelling	Frequent and severe spelling errors that may distract the reader, including misspellings of common words	Generally correct spelling; spelling errors do not distract the reader
Mechanics	Punctuation (commas, apostrophes, quotation marks)	Frequent errors in punctuation; some basic punctuation (commas in a series) may be correct	Generally correct punctuation with occasional mistakes
	Capitalization	Frequent errors in capitalization; some basic capitalization (first word in a sentence) may be correct	Generally correct capitalization with occasional mistakes
	Contractions	Frequent mistakes forming contractions (missing or incorrectly placed apostrophes)	Generally correct use of contractions
			Exceeds Standard
			Consistently clear and correct sentences
			A variety of sentence structures with some complex or compound sentences
			Few, if any, agreement mistakes
			Consistently correct singular, plural, and possessive nouns
			Consistently correct personal and possessive pronouns
			Consistently correct spelling with few errors; spelling errors occur in words that are above grade level
			Correct punctuation in a variety of contexts
			Correct capitalization in a variety of contexts
			Consistently correct use of contractions; may use a variety of contractions

APPENDIX B: CODES FOR WRITING DOMAINS

Adapted from Georgia Writing Assessment Rubric
(Georgia Department of Education, 2006)

DOMAIN 1: CONVENTIONS

Sentence Formation

- Clarity and correctness –unc
- Complexity (will compare early and late entries)
- Run-on –ro
- Fragment –frag

Usage

- Subj/verb agreement – s/v
- Noun forms (sing, plural, poss)
- Word Choice –wc

Mechanics

- Spelling – strikethrough
- Punctuation – circle
- Capitalization – 3 lines under lowercase letter
- Contractions – cont or add correct mark in circle

DOMAIN 2: IDEAS (will compare early and late entries)

Focus

- Supporting Details
- Use of Resources
- Clarity
- Development / Completeness

DOMAIN 3: ORGANIZATION

Format of entry – format

- Date
- Greeting
- Signature
- Indent

Grouping of Ideas – will compare early and late entries

Transitions – will compare early and late entries

DOMAIN 4: STYLE

- Word Choice – wc
- Audience Awareness
- Vocabulary Development
- Author's Voice


APPENDIX C: BLANK EXAMPLE STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Note to Parents:

I have spoken to the class about Family Message Journals. I explained that students are going to participate in the journal project as part of the class curriculum for this year. I have also explained that I am initiating Family Message Journals as my research project for my doctorate degree and that students have a choice about whether or not they would like to be included as part of the study.

Please go over this letter with your child. If you consent to allow your child to participate in the study, have your child sign the assent form at the end of the letter. Remember, any information will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be connected to you or your child.

Students: Read this note from Mrs. McCann and talk about it with your parents.

Dear Students: 

In class, we talked about Family Message Journals. I explained that during this project, you will write in a journal Monday through Thursday about something you learned about in school that day. Each night, somebody in your family will write you back. Everybody in the class is going to write in Family Message Journals because the journals are part of our language arts class this year. Writing in the journals all year will show you how much your writing has improved by the end of the year.

I also told the class that some of you will have the chance, if you want to, to be a part of my research study for the class I am taking to get my doctorate degree. I explained that I will tell other researchers and teachers about our journal project so that they will understand how the Family Message Journals might help their students' writing improve. I would like to use some examples from your journals. I will also interview you to ask you some questions about how you liked (or didn't like) the journals. I need your permission to do that. If you do not want me to use your journal for my project and you do not want to be interviewed, then that is your choice. You will not get in any trouble and you will not get a bad grade on your journal if you don't want to. If you do decide you would like to be a part of my school project, your first name is all that anyone else will see. That way, all your information about you will stay private. I only want others to see the benefits of the journals, not to get into your business!

You can always ask any questions now, or if you have other questions later, you can ask me then.

I won't start studying your journals until the end of January. I will only study your entries from the first one in August until Christmas break. Otherwise, I would not finish my project until you went to the 4th grade! Don't worry, though, you will continue to write to your parents until the end of the school year.



Talk to your parents about it. Then please sign your name below if you want to join this project.

Name of child _____

Child's signature _____

Parent's/Guardian's signature _____

Researcher's signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX D: BLANK EXAMPLE PARENT CONSENT FORM

Dear Parents,

The following is an updated version of the consent form for my Doctoral Study through Walden University. Please read this consent form in its entirety and sign if you wish to participate in the Doctoral Study.

I spoke with some of you at Sneak-a-Peek about Family Message Journals. These are journals in which students will write an entry about four days a week about something learned or thought about in school that day. Parents will respond each night. The Family Message Journals will be a part of our regular third grade curriculum this year. Students will begin writing in mid-August and will continue throughout the 2007-2008 school year.

Doctoral Study involving research: Along with Family Message Journals being a part of the curriculum, these journals are also going to be the subject of my doctoral study. The students will write in the Family Message Journals all year, beginning in mid- to late-August and continuing until May. My research, however, will not begin until after approval from the university, hopefully by the end of January. At that time, I will study the students' improvement in writing ability from the journal entries they wrote from the beginning until Christmas break (December 20th).

Role of Researcher: I have been enrolled as a student at Walden University for the past two years. This year, I will be conducting this research project on Family Message Journals as part of the requirements of the doctorate program.

About the Project: I discovered Family Message Journals early in my doctoral program quite by accident as I was researching another subject. I immediately became interested in the project because of the interest I knew the children would have in the project and the benefits that would come from daily journaling about concepts learned

Why you were selected: You and your child were selected for this case study because of your exemplary participation in the Family Message Journal project. Your dedication to the project and to your child will allow me as the researcher to explain to others the functions of the journals and the benefits reaped by the students, the parents, and the teacher.

Purpose of the research: With so much emphasis on reading and math, writing instruction is being edged out of the curriculum. Time constraints make it increasingly impossible to teach all that the students need to know. Family Message Journals may be one tool for teaching writing across the curriculum, "sneaking" writing instruction in with other subjects. At the same time, the journals will allow parents to be a part of their child's education while communicating regularly with children.

Procedure: Students were each provided with a bound composition book at the beginning of the project. This notebook serves as the Family Message Journal. Students will write in journals from mid-August and continue throughout the school year. Entries will be written Monday through Thursday, and parents will respond each night. As researcher, I will go back and study entries from the beginning of the year through December in order to determine the impact of the journals on students' writing ability.

Interviews: If you choose to be a participant in the study, you will be interviewed in late January. The purpose of the interview is to gain your perspective and opinion of the Family Message Journal project. You will be given the interview questions in advance and you will receive a written transcript of the interview to verify accuracy. Your child will be interviewed as well, about his/her perspective of the journals. Your child's interview questions will be provided for you to review in advance, as well.

Duration of your participation: As stated, students will write Monday through Thursday from the beginning of the school year throughout the entire year. Parents will respond each night. The entries that I will later go back and study will only be those entries written from the beginning of the year through December.

Participation is voluntary. It's Your Choice: Family Message Journals are required in our third grade class this year. BUT your participation in the study is your choice. Participating in the study means that, as the researcher, I would have your permission to use examples of entries written by you and/or your child in my study. Additionally, you would participate in an interview regarding your opinions of the Family Message Journals. You may refuse to participate in the study without any penalty.

Discontinue Participation in the study: If you wish to discontinue your participation in the study, you certainly may do so at any time.

Confidentiality : If I were to use your examples to describe our project, the names of you and your children would be confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for both you and for your child in the Doctoral Study, and your child's name will not appear in the journal entries.

Not participating in the study involves no penalty: Your child is required to participate in Family Message Journals as part of the writing curriculum for our class this year, but if you (or your child) chooses not to participate in the study regarding our journaling experience, there is no penalty. Your child's grade will not be affected in any way if you choose not to participate. Your child's journal grade will not be affected if you prefer that your child be exempt from the study.

No foreseeable risks or discomforts: There are no foreseeable disadvantages or risks of participating in the study. If you do participate in the study, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that your contribution may make it possible for others to learn

about our experience with Family Message Journals and make it possible for others to benefit from our experience.

Anticipated benefits: As a result of participating in the study, I anticipate participants will find increased knowledge of concepts your child is learning in school. I also feel parents will enjoy the frequent communication with your children. By participating in the study, others may learn about the benefits of Family Message Journals and be inspired to use them in their own classrooms.

Compensation for participation: None, except my sincere appreciation.

Confidentiality: Everything you tell me during this project will be kept private. No one else will know your name or your child's name or be able to connect the journal entries with you or your child. The only situation in which I am required to identify participants is if I learn something that could be harmful to you or someone else.

Asking questions: You can ask any questions you would like at any time. If you think of a question later, please contact me at school and I will be happy to talk with you. You may also contact my Doctoral Committee Chair, Dr. Casey Reason, if you have any concerns. He may be reached at 419-841-1115.

Copy of Consent Form: You may keep a copy of your consent form so that you may refer to it if necessary.

Contact me: If you wish to contact me for any reason, please feel free to do so anytime. You may call the school 706-327-3900 or email me at my school email address: mccann-s@harris.k12.ga.us. I will return your call or email as soon as possible.

Please sign below if you agree to want to participate in this project.

Statement of Consent

_____ I have read the above information. I have received answers to my questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to participate in this study.

Printed name of adult participant _____

Signature of adult participant _____

Researcher's signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX E: SAMPLE CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Name of Signer:

During the course of my activity in collecting data for this research: “Family Message Journals,” I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement, I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I’m officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signature:

Date:

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CASE STUDY FAMILIES

These FMJs have been one way to evaluate _____'s writing abilities, strengths and weaknesses, and growth in content-area knowledge. Since you have seen _____'s FMJ every day, you have no doubt noticed the progress (or not) yourself. I'd like your input about the FMJ experience from your perspective. **Research questions to be answered appear in red: RQ is central question; RQ1, 2, and 3 are subsidiary questions.**

1. Do you think FMJ helped your child learn? In what way? **RQ1**
2. Do you think _____'s writing has changed since beginning the journals? How? **RQ and RQ2**
3. Looking at the FMJ, in what specific areas do you notice improvement (examples might be spelling, punctuation, handwriting, length, subject matter...) **RQ and RQ2**
4. What areas still need improvement? **RQ and RQ2**
5. Do you think FMJ has helped you to follow what your child is learning in school? How? How important is that to you? Do you think you would feel the same way had it not been for the journals? **RQ3**
6. Do you think _____'s communication skills have changed? How? (prompt: Was ___ able to get the message across? Did you understand the nature of the message? Did ___ improve at writing clearly to express ideas more fully because they were writing to someone outside our classroom who does not know the material and WILL not, if not expressed clearly?) **RQ3**
7. Has your relationship with your child changed from the beginning of the journals? How? Do you think the journals had any affect on your relationship or do you think your relationship would be the same with or without the journals? **RQ3**
8. Is there anything else you would like to add? **Affective/ Self-Efficacy**

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CASE STUDY STUDENTS

First, look through your Family Message Journal. Look at some of the entries at the front, the middle, and the end of the journal. Think back to when you wrote those.

Research questions to be answered appear in red: RQ is central question; RQ1, 2, and 3 are subsidiary questions.

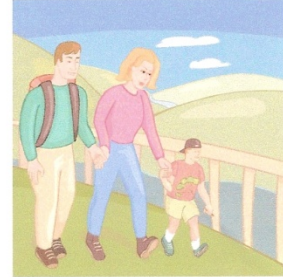
1. What do you think about your work in your FMJ? **RQ**
2. Looking through your journal, what do you think you did better at the end than at when we first started the FMJs? **RQ**
3. What are some of the things you need to keep trying to get better at? **RQ**
4. Do you think FMJ helped you learn more in math, science, social studies, etc when you wrote on topics from those subjects? How? **RQ1**
5. Did it make a difference for you that you had an audience (family) and a purpose (communicating what you learned to your family) for writing? Would it have been just the same to have a Learning Log where you wrote what you learned and showed it to me? **RQ2**
6. Do you think your communication skills improved? (Prompt: your ability to express yourself clearly – Remember, your family was not there when we learned things, and you had to explain it to them. Do you think you got better at writing so that your family understood your messages better?) **RQ2**
7. How do you feel inside when you write in your journal? Do you enjoy it? Does it make you happy? Is it fun? Why?
8. How do you feel when you read your family's responses? **RQ3**
9. Do you think writing in your FMJ helped your family to know what you were learning? How? Do you think they appreciated that? Why? **RQ3**
10. What was your favorite part about writing in your FMJ? **Affective (Self-Efficacy)**

11. What do you NOT like about the journals? Anything you would like to change?
Affective (Self-Efficacy)

12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your FMJ? **Affective (Self-Efficacy)**

APPENDIX H: PARENTS' HOMEWORK

Parents' Homework



I am looking forward to working with you and your child this school year. The better I understand your child, the better I am able to meet his/her individual needs. In that respect, and for countless other reasons, you are a precious resource. Any information you offer will be helpful. Please complete this questionnaire and return as soon as possible. Thank you for your time and assistance.

Child's name _____

Your name _____ Your occupation _____

Spouse's name _____ Spouse's occupation _____

Names and ages of other children _____

ABOUT YOUR CHILD:

Please list any responsibilities your child has at home. _____

What do you consider to be your child's strengths? _____

What do you consider to be your child's weaknesses? _____

Did your child have any particular struggles in school last year? _____

What goals would you like to see your child reach this year? _____

Does your child have any particular allergies to animals or food? _____

Is there anything else you think I should know about your child? _____



ABOUT YOU:

Do you prefer to be informed of your child's progress through phone calls, notes, or conferences? _____

When would be the best time of day for me to contact you? _____

At what number could I best reach you at that time? _____

Where were you and your spouse born? _____

How long have you lived in the area? _____

What is your travel experience? _____

What are your special hobbies or interests? _____

Would you be interested in volunteering in our classroom? _____

If so, would you prefer to volunteer on a weekly, monthly, occasional, or one-time basis? _____

Would you be interested in being our room representative? _____

Do you have any expertise that you could share with the class? (interesting occupation, neat hobby... _____

Is there any special service you could provide? (ex: We have had a dad in the pizza business – free pizza; a mom in the grocery business – free snacks; a dad in the printing business – free neat colored paper; a dad working at Tom's – free crackers; and even a retired grandmother – free grandparent to read aloud to children!) _____



Thank you,
S. McCann

APPENDIX I: PARENT PACKET TO INTRODUCE FAMILY MESSAGE
JOURNALS

Dear Parents,

We are beginning Family Message Journals on Monday. Please carefully read the materials in this packet. Included are: Parent letter introducing the journals, Consent Form for adult participation in my doctoral research study, student assent form for participation in the study.

Please keep in mind that whether or not you or your children choose to participate in the study, the whole class is required to participate in the journals as part of language arts. Participation in the study really just means that you give your permission for me to use example entries in order to help describe our project in my doctoral dissertation.

Please call or send a note if you have any questions. We started journals for the first time after Christmas last year and they were a HUGE success. I am really excited about this project!

Thanks,
Mrs. McCann

August 18, 2007

Dear Parents,

I know this is horribly long, but so important, so please read the entire letter.
SORRY!!

Our class is about to begin a very special project which will be ongoing for most of the school year. Don't worry. It's painless. It is called **Family Message Journals**. Basically, Family Message Journals are journals in which your child writes you (or some other adult in the house) a note about something learned (or done, or thought about) at school that day.

There are several purposes for the journals. First, how many of you ask your child what he or she learned at school that day? What do they always say? "Nothing." With Family Message Journals (FMJ), you will have a better idea about what your child is learning. Another good reason for the journals is for me to use them as a tool to teach writing, and for their writing to improve over the course of the journaling. Of course, another positive aspect is that you can bond with your precious child! The children will get more out of writing if it is for a purpose. It is no fun to write about what they learned and turn it in to the teacher. I was there. I already know what they learned. It makes more sense to them to write what they learned to someone who was NOT there. This situation also forces them to use more detail in their explanation, so you will understand them.

*****We would like **you to respond** each day to your child's note. It should be something more than, "Cool" or "That's great." Please try to make a comment specifically about what your child wrote, or add something else you may know about the subject, or even ask a question of your own. Please use the Friendly Letter format, which is what this letter is. It has the date at the top right, the greeting (the Dear part) on the left, the body (what you write) and the closing (Love, Sincerely...), and the signature (your name).

What are you supposed to write? Your responses can be as unique as your children! I have included some examples at the end of this note. The entries may take different forms, like a scientific research letter, a poem, an opinion about a story, even a list.

*****Don't worry if you are not sure what to write, or if you might not spell everything correctly, or anything! **The main idea is to write *something*** to your child. Imagine the motivation for your child to write if they have the most special people in their lives writing back to them!

The best part is, even if you are on a tight schedule, jotting a note in your child's journal **should only take a few minutes.**

If you work late and come home from work after your child is in bed, have a "meeting spot" where your child will always leave the journal for you, such as in a specific kitchen chair, or even your pillow!

***** If you feel you (or any other adult in the house) **cannot make this commitment, PLEASE LET me know.** This must be an ongoing project and it will be very important to your child to have a response every day to read. If you think you will not be able to help, just please let me know and I will find someone else to be your child's pen pal.

***** Anyone in your house can respond to the journal. It does NOT have to be the same person every time. Mom, Dad, Grandma, older sibling are invited to respond. This is especially good for some parents who may work hours that normally prevent them from participating in school activities. Two students last year went to their grandparents' house after school. Grandma was their respondent.

***** **We cannot lose** these journals. Besides the fact that they cost me a fortune (ha!) we want to be able to see your child's progress so we need to keep up with them. I have explained to the class that the journals live in their bookbags. They will come out to visit for their parents to write in, and they must immediately go back to their bookbag home.

I am so excited about this endeavor. My class tried these journals for the first time last year from January until May. It was even more successful than I'd hoped. I had 100% parental participation!! Parents and students really enjoyed the project.

After you read this letter (I know it is horribly long, but I didn't want to leave out any information that would be useful) **please sign and return only the bottom tear-off.** I want you to be able to keep the letter for reference.

Thank you so much for
all you do for our children,
Sandi McCann

See examples on next page.

Example #1

Child journal entry

January 8, 2007

Dear Mom,

Did you know that our state tree is the live oak and our state flower is the Cherokee rose? The state fossil is a shark tooth.

Love,
Bob (name changed)

Parent response

Dear Bobby,

No, I didn't know any of those. Even mommy learns something new every day. I bet the Cherokee rose is very pretty. Do you know why the Cherokee rose was chosen? Can you draw me a picture of one?

Love,
Mom

Example #2

Child journal entry

March 3, 2007

Dear Daddy,

Did you know erosion can push things back? Sometimes it can form a wall made of sand, sticks, rock, and clay.

Love,
Jill

Parent response

Dear Jill,

I did know that, actually. The oceans keep getting bigger because of erosion. One day the water may reach all the way to our hotel at the beach. Wouldn't that be wild?

Love,
Daddy

Please sign and return this portion. Keep the letter so you can refer to it if necessary.

_____ **I have read this letter. I understand and will make a commitment to respond to my child each time the journal comes home (Monday through Thursday).**

_____ **I have read this letter. I understand, but feel I cannot make this commitment. Please find someone to be my child's respondent.**

Child's name _____

Parent signature _____

APPENDIX J: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

Permission Letter from Dr. Julie Wollman RE: Possibly using her coding system

Email sent to Dr. Wollman on July 3, 2007. Reply received July 3, 2007.

Hello Sandi- This is my correct address but I also received your message to my old (RIC) address earlier today and planned to reply tonight. It's a pleasure to get your message and to hear that FMJs are working for you and are the focus of your research. You are welcome to use my coding system as long as you cite the source. I wish you the best of luck and would simply suggest that you keep at the forefront the importance of writing for a purpose and audience- that, in my opinion, is why you have seen such great results, and why so much school writing is so dismal-- there is no purpose or audience other than the teacher. Thanks for your very kind message, Julie

Julie E. Wollman, Ph.D.
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Worcester State Colleg
486 Chandler Street
Worcester MA 01602
Phone: 508-929-8038
FAX: 508-929-8187

Permission Letter from Dr. Julie Wollman RE: using sample FMJ entries

Dear Sandy- It's good to hear from you and to know that FMJs are working so well for you and for the families you've engaged in them! You certainly may use the two sample entries as long as you cite them, making clear that they're taken from work/book. My name has changed but you should still cite it as it was when the book was published. Best of luck with your dissertation. I hope you'll keep in touch; as of July 1st I'll be at Wheelock College in Boston

jwollman@wheelock.edu

Best regards, Julie

Julie E. Wollman, Ph.D.
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Worcester State College
486 Chandler Street
Worcester MA 01602
Phone: 508-929-8038
FAX: 508-929-8187

-----Original Message-----

From: sandimc@mchsi.com [mailto:sandimc@mchsi.com]

Sent: Tuesday, June 10, 2008 6:35 PM

To: Wollman, Julie

Subject: permission re: 2 graphics?

Hi Dr. Wollman,

When I last contacted you via email in July of 2007, I asked, permission to use your coding system for Family Message Journals if I needed to in my doctoral dissertation. You graciously granted permission (though I ended up using more of my own concoction). I wanted to ask if I could also use 2 example entries. They are found on page 121 of your FMJ book (Kristen's September and May entries) in my literature review, cited of course. I figured if you were going to allow me to use your coding, you wouldn't mind my showing one of your examples, but I wanted to be sure anyway.

APPENDIX K: CODES FOR FAMILY REPLIES

Int	Demonstrate interest in child's ideas/learning and ask children to tell more
NI	Expand children's knowledge by providing new information
Op	share personal opinions or feelings
Ack	Acknowledge a good idea and vow to try them
Q	Ask questions to encourage thinking and problem solving
Adv	Suggest advice, solutions to problems
Mod	Model a range of writing options
Rem	Remind children of responsibilities or remind to tell something later
Mem	Reflecting/sharing memories
Val	Validating- repeating children's words
P	Show praise
Aff	Affection
Hum	Humor
Scold	Scold
Apol	Apologize
T	Tell more, teach me

APPENDIX L: DAILY SUBJECT AND JOURNAL TOPICS

Daily Subject and Topic for Messages

Week/ Entry	Subject	Topic
<u>Week 1</u>		
1	Language	Welcome to Family Message Journals
2	Science	Bubba the Betta
3	Reading	Nate the Great and genre
4	Math and Science	Graph fish food consumption
<u>Week 2</u>		
5	Science	Describe betta experiment
6	Math	Explain place value
7	Social studies	Urban, suburban, rural
<u>Week 3</u>		
8	Language	Describe dry-erase drawing
9	Language	Four kinds of sentences
10	Other	ITBS testing
11	Math	Estimation
<u>Week 4</u>		
12	Other	Mr. Morris student teacher
13	Language	Subjects and predicates

14	Social studies	Rights and responsibilities
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15	Math	Announce test and study
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Week 5

16	Science	Death of Bubba the Betta
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17	Language	Ode to Bubba
----	----------	--------------

18	Science	New Betta
----	---------	-----------

Week 6

19	Math	Missing addends
----	------	-----------------

20	Social studies	Three branches of government
----	----------------	------------------------------

21	Reading	Balto reading story
----	---------	---------------------

Week 7

22	Reading	Wild Shots reading story
----	---------	--------------------------

23	Reading	Author's Purpose
----	---------	------------------

24	Science	Layers of the earth
----	---------	---------------------

25	Social studies	Natural resources
----	----------------	-------------------

Week 8

26	Reading	Rosie Visiting Dog story
----	---------	--------------------------

27	Social studies	Mayor, Governor, President
----	----------------	----------------------------

28	Language	Subjects and predicates
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Week 9

29	Math	Arrays
30	Math	Subtracting across zero
31	Science	Three types of rock
32	Language	Personal Narrative

Week 10

33	Reading	Little Grunt story
34	Language	Write Personal Narrative
35	Language	McCann Queen Story

Week 11

36	Reading/Soc St.	Dancing Drum story
37	Math	Multiplication Wrap Ups
38	Reading	Mola
39	Language	McCann Lost Voice story

Week 12

None	Thanksgiving	break
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Week 13

40	Social Studies	Thankful for...
41	Lang. and Sci.	How earthquake happens
42	Language	My Substitute Is An Alien

Week 14

43	Social Studies	Kwanzaa
44	Social Studies	Hanukah
45	Science	Write about field trip

Week 15

46	Math	Illustrate/explain 9x trick
47	Other	Pilot testing for RTI test
48	Social Studies	Explain class "adopted" family
49	Language	Compare/Contrast Gingerbread stories

Week 16

50	Language	Write Gingerbread story
51	Language	FMJ experience

Dear Ms. McCann:

This email is to notify you that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your application for the study entitled, "Family Message Journals: A Tool for Writing Instruction with Parental Involvement."

Your approval # is 01-28-08-0310455. You will need to reference this number in the appendix of your doctoral study and in any future funding or publication submissions.

Your IRB approval expires on January 28, 2009. One month before this expiration date, you will be sent a Continuing Review Form, which must be submitted if you wish to collect data beyond the approval expiration date.

Your IRB approval is contingent upon your adherence to the exact procedures described in the final version of the IRB application materials that have been submitted as of this date. If you need to make any changes to your research staff or procedures, you must obtain IRB approval by submitting the IRB Request for Change in Procedures Form. You will receive an IRB approval status update within 1 week of submitting the change request form and are not permitted to implement changes prior to receiving approval. Please note that Walden University does not accept responsibility or liability for research activities conducted without the IRB's approval, and the University will not accept or grant credit for student work that fails to comply with the policies and procedures related to ethical standards in research.

When you submitted your IRB application, you made a commitment to communicate both discrete adverse events and general problems to the IRB within 1 week of their occurrence/realization. Failure to do so may result in invalidation of data, loss of academic

credit, and/or loss of legal protections otherwise available to the researcher.

Both the Adverse Event Reporting form and Request for Change in Procedures form can be obtained at the IRB section of the Walden web site or by emailing irb@waldenu.edu:

http://inside.waldenu.edu/c/Student_Faculty/StudentFaculty_4274.htm

Researchers are expected to keep detailed records of their research activities (i.e., participant log sheets, completed consent forms, etc.) for the same period of time they retain the original data. If, in the future, you require copies of the originally submitted IRB materials, you may request them from Institutional Review Board.

Please note that this letter indicates that the IRB has approved your research. You may not begin the research phase of your dissertation, however, until you have received the **Notification of Approval to Conduct Research** (which indicates that your committee and Program Chair have also approved your research proposal). Once you have received this notification by email, you may begin your data collection.

Leilani Endicott, Ph.D.

Chair, Walden University Institutional Review Board

Email: irb@waldenu.edu

Fax: 626-605-0472

Tollfree : 800-925-3368 ext. 1210

Office address for Walden University: