

“WHY DOWNT YOU RIYT BACK TO ME?”

Family Letter Writing in Kindergarten

Kathryn Pole

What happens when young children and extended family members write letters back and forth? This.

Family History

My mom made the best lasagna I've ever tasted. It was part of the story of every family gathering and helped baptize our newborns, celebrate our accomplishments, welcome home our soldiers, and bid farewell to those who left us. I noticed its absence at the meal following Mom's funeral; no one else knew how to make it. I never asked her to write it down, and I regret I do not have it to pass along to my own children.

What might this have to do with a letter-writing project? As a kindergarten teacher, year after year I had my students keep journals. They wrote in these journals most days, but the writing they did was routine. At the start of the year, they would mostly draw and dictate their words to me. Eventually, they began to write on their own, but their writing rarely moved past predictable statements. Journal entries began with "I like..." or "I saw..." followed by a word or two.

While my students were prolific writers in terms of the amount of paper they used, they rarely wrote extended stories, and the themes did not vary much over a year. I was bored and not all that convinced of the value of kindergarten journals. I was

interested in seeing how far my students could be nudged as writers. I had ideas. I did frequent mini-lessons on writing, I read books that told stories of children who were writers, I modeled writing, and I "shared the pen." Still, I felt like my students could do more.

Coinciding with my belief that I could support emergent writers better, as a parent myself, I wished that I had asked my own mother to tell more family stories, write family recipes, caption family photos, and create a family history that would bind my children with a sense of extended family.

As I considered these two issues, I began to think of ways to both encourage writing in my kindergarten class and support my students' families in the keeping of family history. I decided to create a correspondence project, with my kindergarten students and extended families exchanging letters, and see how this project might impact my students and their families.

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Scholarly Framework

This study draws on a view of family literacy that has roots in sociohistorical theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the belief that learning is a social activity. In particular, it is grounded in the belief that families can support and extend children's learning. Cultural aspects of learning can explain how cultural practices of prior generations help children develop as participants in their own families (Rogoff, 2003) as extended family members play a role in the literacy development of young children. It also draws on a view of family literacy that promotes the context of family (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001), where home literacy practices are valued (Johnson, 2010; Rasinski & Padak, 2009). Finally, it draws on the notion that extended family is important and extended family members have stories and legacies to share—stories that are worth writing down (Dworin, 2006). Deficit models of family literacy were intentionally rejected in favor of a view that families bring strength to learning (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Nichols, Nixon, & Rowsell, 2009), that schools can take up literacy practices that reflect homes, and that both home and school can blend as families and teachers work

together (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003; Pahl & Kelly, 2005; Purcell-Gates, 2000).

The study is also situated in the notion that writing has an important place in early childhood literacy because of its reciprocal relationship with reading and language development (Anderson & Briggs, 2011; Cabell, Tortorelli, & Gerde, 2013; Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Writing helps develop foundational literacy skills such as phonological awareness, decoding and spelling, letter knowledge, and print awareness.

Writing was viewed as a developmental process where children move through stages from making marks on a page that mimic the shape and fluidity of writing, to drawing letter-like shapes, to combining letters and letter-like shapes, to increasingly advanced forms of invented spelling and, ultimately, accurate writing (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnson, 2008; Clay, 1979; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2009).

It also draws on the research that explains the role an audience plays on a child's development as a writer (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2011). Authentic writing for authentic audiences is motivating. For children to want to write, they need to know that their writing has meaning and is valued.

The Design of the Project

The research I present in this article investigated how a school year-long letter-writing project between kindergarten students and extended family members could facilitate literacy development in students and provide a way to build intergenerational bonds through correspondence focused on family history and stories.

“Family is important and extended family members have stories and legacies to share.”

The project took place in my kindergarten classroom in a small southwestern U.S. city. Additional study details are described in Appendix A. As the classroom teacher, I was given the freedom by my district and school administrations to write and teach my own lessons within a balanced literacy framework and the district scope and sequence. I had secured a teacher-as-researcher grant from a local education foundation, and I had the support and approval of my principal and school district.

The project extended from September to May of one school year. It is difficult to separate out the number of hours the children spent participating in this study because writing was woven into most of the things that were done in class, and there was never a segment of time called “letter writing.” Additional participants were the family members who wrote letters to the kindergarten students. The time commitment from these participants ranged from about 3 hours to 10 hours. The family members had the option to commit as much or as little time as they wished.

My analysis centers on the body of correspondence between the students and their family members, my lessons and reflections, and e-mails between the family members and me. I used a constant comparative analysis (Fram, 2013) technique as I looked at the correspondence for each student, each family correspondent, and each pair together and discovered themes that emerged from the entire set of data. Constant

Pause and Ponder

- How might teachers invite extended family to participate in the classroom?
- How could you use strategies presented in this article to encourage your students to write?
- How else might a letter-writing project be structured?
- What other ways can young children be motivated to write?

comparative analysis is a process where data are compared to other data during coding.

In this project, I looked at student-family correspondence over time to identify ways the writers were connecting to one another, and I looked at student writing over time to identify changes in development. The analysis was layered in the sense that I analyzed correspondence as it was written and as it arrived, and I also looked at how each letter fit into the entire body of that student-family member's correspondence over the year. I compared field notes taken in the classroom to the children's writing as a way to understand how classroom interactions supported children as writers.

I also analyzed frequencies in how often students wrote letters, how many letters each student received, how many words students wrote, and how many separate ideas were represented in each student letter. In addition, I analyzed student development in skills such as spelling and letter formation.

Setting Up a Letter-Writing Project

During the summer before the project began, I gathered supplies: writing paper, colored pencils, pens, envelopes, blank sheets of mailing labels, and a scanner, all purchased with grant funds from a local education foundation. I also purchased picture books that featured characters who were writers (more specifically, letter writers) so we could discuss as a class the reasons people write and look for models of letters.

In early September, a few weeks into the school year, I sent a memo home to the parents of my students asking them to contact out-of-town family members and enlist one to be a regular correspondent with the kindergarten student. I explained the nature of the project: that

this would be a commitment that lasted from October until May and would require the adult correspondent to write letters to the child. The reward for participating would be a series of letters written by 5- and 6-year-old children, an opportunity to participate in the life of our classroom, and the awareness that the adult was passing on family history that might otherwise be lost.

Parents of the children were asked for permission for their child to participate, and they signed a consent form that allowed me to share their child's work. I also sent a consent document to each of the family member correspondents, explaining the project and what they were being asked to do: to write letters to their child at least once per month from October through May, to use natural language, and to tell family stories.

In addition, children provided verbal assent. I discussed the project with them, answered their questions, and assured that they understood what they were being asked to do and what options were available to them. Children were asked again for assent every time new correspondence arrived; they had the choice to let me read it aloud to the class, let me read it aloud to the child only, or not let me read it aloud at all. On every occasion, children chose for me to read it aloud to the whole class.

I chose to use a paper-based form of writing rather than e-mail for a few reasons. Because, at the start of the project, the children in my kindergarten class were still drawing images as

placeholders for words, and because their pictures sometimes carried more meaning than the words they could write (Labadie, Pole, & Rogers, 2013), I wanted to give them opportunities to use both writing and drawing. I wanted to build an anticipation that is inherent in the use of paper-based mail, unlike the immediacy of e-mail. Also, although many families have access to digital literacies, a digital divide still exists (James, 2008); some of the extended families did not have Internet or home computers, and we had only two computers in our classroom.

Within a few days of my request for correspondents, I had addresses from every family. I drafted a letter that I sent to the corresponding adults, welcoming them to the class and describing the project. I specifically asked that they use natural language to tell their child family history and that they look for opportunities to keep strands of communication going.

In class, we looked for opportunities to write. When the children had a hard day in music class, we spent time writing a letter of apology to the music teacher. On a day that the cafeteria served especially delicious cookies, we wrote a class letter thanking the cooks. The students saw a hole in the playground, apparently dug by a native critter; they wrote a memo to the custodian describing the problem.

During this time, I also encouraged note writing among the students. They began to send each other invitations for

“In class, we looked for opportunities to write. On a day that the cafeteria served especially delicious cookies, we wrote a class letter thanking the cooks.”

Table 1 Picture Books Featuring Characters Who Write

Ada, A.F. (1994). <i>Dear Peter Rabbit</i> (Illus. L. Tryon). New York, NY: Aladdin.
Ada, A.F. (2001). <i>With love, Little Red Hen</i> (Illus. L. Tryon). New York, NY: Aladdin.
Ada, A.F. (1998). <i>Yours truly, Goldilocks</i> (Illus. L. Tryon). New York, NY: Aladdin.
Ahlberg, J., & Ahlberg, A. (1986). <i>The jolly postman, or other people's letters</i> . London, UK: Heinemann.
Caseley, J. (1994). <i>Dear Annie</i> . New York, NY: HarperCollins.
Cronin, D. (2000). <i>Click, clack, moo: Cows that type</i> (Illus. B. Lewin). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing.
Gibbons, G. (1982). <i>The post office book: Mail and how it moves</i> . New York, NY: HarperCollins.
James, S. (1991). <i>Dear Mr. Blueberry</i> . New York, NY: Aladdin.
Keats, E.J. (1968). <i>A letter to Amy</i> . New York, NY: Harper & Row.
Orloff, K.K. (2004). <i>I wanna iguana</i> (Illus. D. Catrow). New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers.
Pak, S. (1999). <i>Dear Juno</i> (Illus. S.K. Hartung). New York, NY: Puffin.
Stewart, S. (1997). <i>The gardener</i> (Illus. D. Small). New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
Teague, M. (2002). <i>Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters from obedience school</i> . New York, NY: Scholastic.

play-dates, letters telling about week-end plans, and notes complimenting one another for various achievements. Note-passing became a constant and welcome activity.

What Writing Instruction Looked Like

For some of the students, kindergarten was their first opportunity with writing. Other students knew how to write their names and a few words and had practice using pencils. For all of the students in this class, a letter-writing project of this magnitude was new. For the project to work, there needed to be instruction that met the developmental needs of each student. I continued using teaching techniques that were based in whole-class morning meetings, minilessons and read-alouds throughout the day, small-group instruction as the context for teaching most skills, and individual attention that addressed in-the-moment needs. I understood that I was asking my students to learn to write by writing, and I supported their learning in a variety of ways.

I felt that it would be helpful if students regularly had examples of writers. Therefore, I read aloud as many picture books as I could find that provided

emphasis on characters who wrote (see Table 1 for some titles). We would linger longer over those characters, discussing their writing, the way the writer acknowledged an audience, and interesting ways of starting and ending letters. These books were placed in the classroom library, and children could look at them again or use them as mentor texts.

I also felt that young writers needed instruction in the skills and mechanics of writing. I taught writing skills in minilessons for the whole group, in small-group instruction, and as I worked with individual students. Students learned to say words slowly so they could hear the sounds, they learned letter formation, and they learned to put spaces between words when they wrote.

There was an evolving class word wall with high-frequency words and words we collectively identified as important as well as phonograms that children could use to help make more complex words. We played circle games based on letters, sounds, and words. We engaged in shared writing (teacher practice), collaborative writing (students writing together), and independent writing.

We had learning centers set up around the room, and much of our day involved

students working in small groups doing these activities. All of these areas had literacy woven into them. For example, the block center had paper and pencils so that builders could document their structures. The dramatic play center had paper for list making and recipe writing. The science center had blank booklets for recording observations. A word work center let students practice forming letters in a variety of ways: tracing over sandpaper, dragging a finger over gel in plastic bags, using an assortment of fun writing instruments on colorful paper. In other centers, students could play with games that let them manipulate sounds, letters, and words. (See more suggestions for support in Table 2.)

Writing Letters

In mid-October, after we had been in school for eight weeks and all students could write their names, I gave the children paper with decorated borders; showed them all the glittery metallic pens, colored pencils, and other supplies; and gave them each note cards with the printed names of their family members.

They wrote the first of their letters; most had simple messages like “Dear Gram, I love you.” Each letter was scanned so that there were copies available for analysis. I had a sheet of mailing labels printed with the address of each correspondent. A label was affixed to

Table 2 A Few Guiding Principles

- Write every day. Even when we were not writing letters, we were writing.
- Accept and honor all forms of child writing, including drawing, scribbling, and invented spellings; at the same time, use those things as the basis for instruction. Have honest conversations with students about adult limitations on reading child writing.
- Have support for writing throughout the classroom: word walls, personal word banks, charts, posters, and books. Do not feel that you need to do the work of spelling for children.

each outgoing envelope, which was then stamped and taken to the office’s “outgoing mail” bin. And the students waited.

Within a few days, letters began coming back. The families told the students how excited they were about writing to them. Many told stories about the child’s parent at age 5, and most closed with a hope for another letter soon.

As mail began arriving, the first thing I noticed was the anticipation. The children figured out that mail arrived daily, on a predictable schedule, and that while they ate lunch, I checked for our mail. As I left them in the lunchroom, I was always reminded, “Don’t forget to get the mail!” When I met students at the end of lunch, they always asked me, “Did I get any?”

At first, I passed out the mail. The children eagerly opened the envelopes, read what they could, looked at any photos or other trinkets that were included, then handed over their letters for me to read to them. These readings began to have a ritual. The child who got the letter would stand close to me, reading it with me, and the other children would gather around to hear.

When I noticed that the children could easily read each other’s names, even when the writer did not use the manuscript-style print that the children used, I began putting the mail in a mailbox. We added the rotating job of delivering the mail to our daily tasks.

By mid-November, all of the children had received something in the mail. As letters arrived, the children sent replies. The early replies were simple and usually expressed thanks for a gift or an invitation to visit. But the students were writing, and I could already see family connections being made.

Findings

What Writing Looked Like

I looked around the room at my students. Five-year-old Annie (all names

are pseudonyms) sat at a low table, her face scrunched deep in thought, as she printed “Why downt you riyt back to me?” in a letter to her grandmother, who lived several hundred miles away and who had apparently taken too long to send mail (see Figure 1). A group of students sat at another table trying to help one of them spell “vacation,” a word needed in a letter to a grandparent. They suggested and discussed various graphemes that made the right sounds, and after some reasonable guesses, one student suggested that they go to the class library because that word was in one of our books. At another table, a group of boys were collaborating on a book they titled *All About Trucks*, which

ended up being a 16-page co-authored volume depicting many kinds of trucks and their uses.

By the third round of letters, my students were arriving at school in the morning talking about writing. They wondered if they would have mail to reply to. They planned what they were going to write in their next letters. They also had plans for other writing, because now, they considered themselves to be writers. On the days when there was no mail to answer, the children wrote stories and books. A student wrote about all the many kinds of cake she could bake. A group of boys worked together to produce three issues of a sports magazine. Audra wrote *My Daddy*, a book

Figure 1 Annie’s Letter to Her Grandmother, Asking “Why Downt You Riyt Back to Me?”

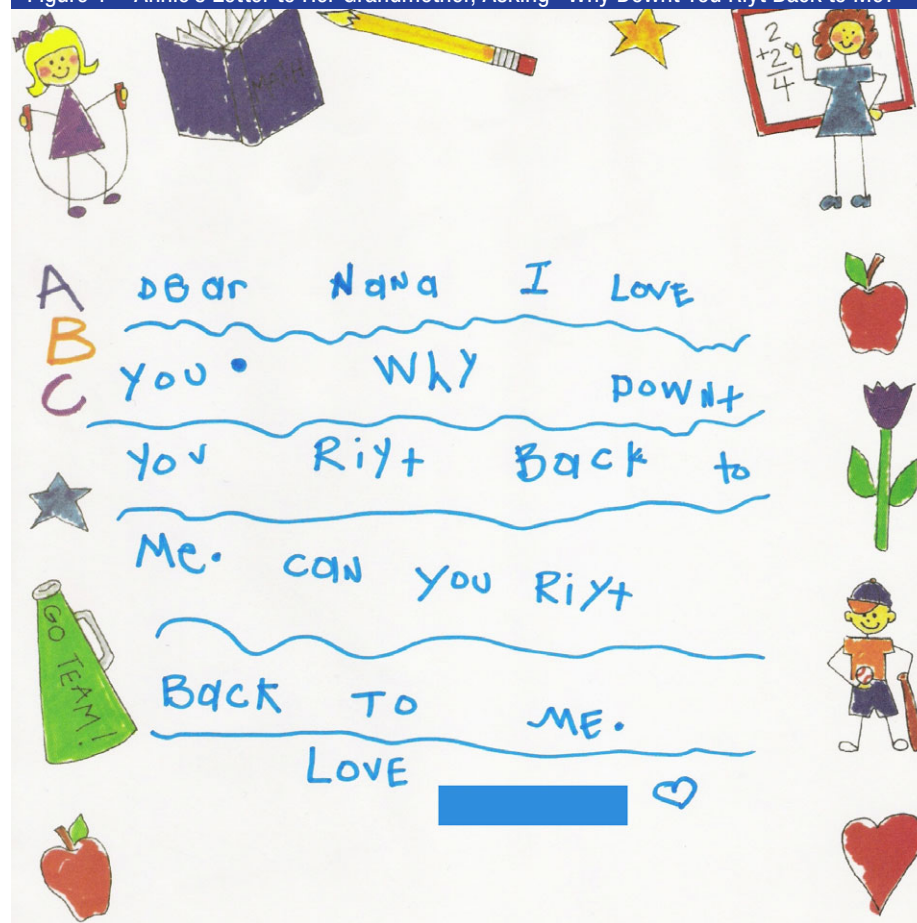


Figure 2 My Daddy Tucks Me into Bed at Night. We Say Prayers, I Say Goodnight and I Love You



about all the things she appreciated about her father. One page of Audra's book appears in Figure 2.

Our day centered on literacy. The students began to look more at the books in the room as resources for their stories and as technical help for spelling. Suddenly, it became important to them that writing have a form that others could read. I started noticing more attention to spacing, return sweeps, and punctuation.

Improved Spelling and Handwriting

At the start of the project, we discussed as a class that adults who did not often read kid writing might have trouble with the unconventional way that kids put letters, words, and spaces on a page (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011) or in reading kid spelling. I told them that if I felt like the person they wrote to would not be able to read the letters we were sending, I would attach a sticky note to the paper

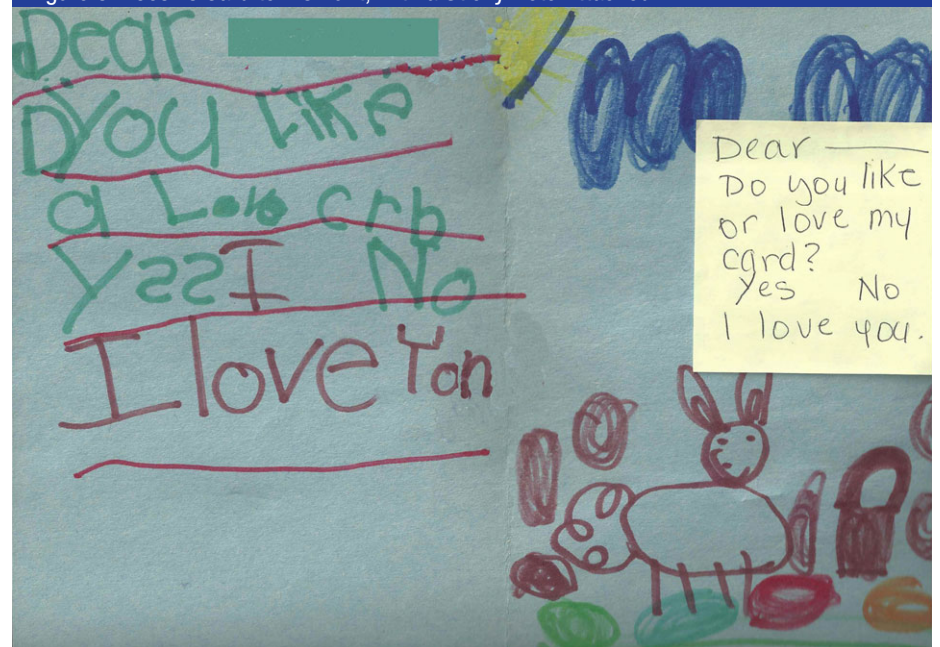
with my transcription. As the children finished letters, they read them to me, and I took dictation to attach to the letter (see Figure 3).

By the second round of letters, two students had already decided that writing letters that did not need my translation was an important goal. By January, more than half the class worked on not needing my notes, and by the final round of letters in late May, my help was not needed.

Students learned to use a variety of resources to help them. For handwriting, they referred to a wall chart or to personal handwriting sheets when they were unsure of letter formation. For spelling, they learned to listen to phonemes as they wrote, to segment words into smaller chunks, to refer to a class word wall or personal word banks, or to consult books. Sometimes they did this work independently, but this kind of word work often turned into a collaborative effort as students helped one another figure out tricky spellings.

I did not expect perfection; if I felt that a spelling was a close enough approximation, I did not provide a translation. For example, I decided that Alison's "Daddy jives me and Kristin

Figure 3 Josh's Card to His Aunt, with a Sticky Note Attached



to skool” was close enough, especially since it was accompanied by an illustration of a car. Not to need my sticky note on their papers was a motivation for students’ improved handwriting and spelling.

Longer Thoughts and Multiple Themes

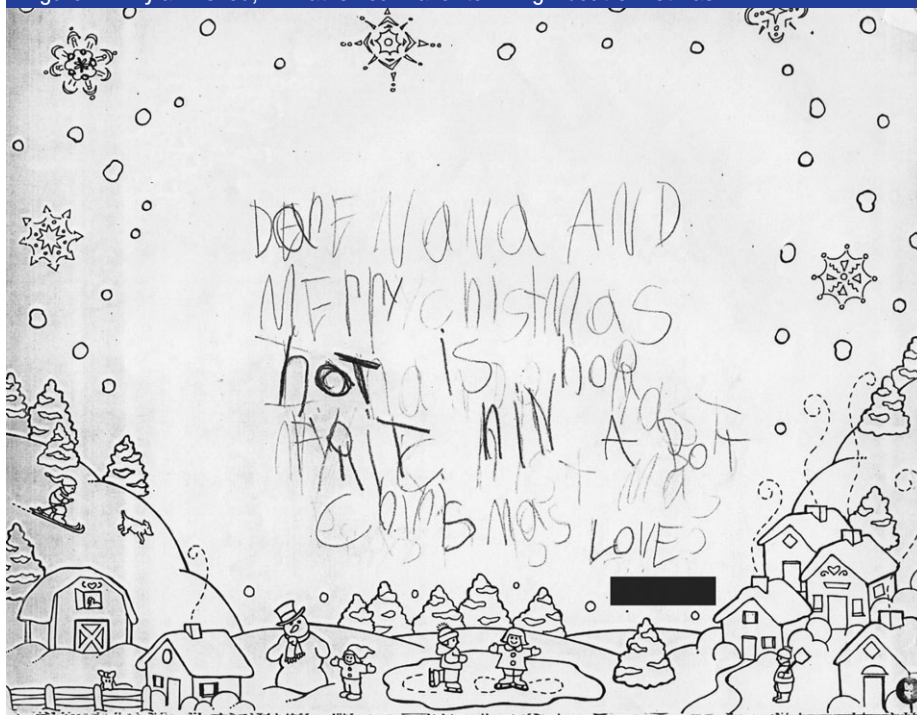
At the start of the project, the students’ letters contained just one theme, similar to what I had seen in the journals. Often, it was an invitation to visit, thanks for a gift, or a “How are you?” The average letter in October, excluding the greeting and signature, was five words. A typical November letter said, “Dear Nana and Papa, Can you come for Christmas? Love, Avery.” By May, the letters the children wrote were about 47 words with about three discrete ideas per letter.

I also began to see children replying to the content of the letters they received. The adults modeled this first. When Olivia wrote to her grandfather, “Katrina and I are friends again. It’s a long story,” Her grandfather wrote back a letter reminiscing about his best friend from childhood, who happened to still be his good friend after 56 years.

When Riley wrote to his grandmother about the family dog, his grandmother wrote back a letter about her own pets. The children started thinking about the content of the letters and formulating replies that kept conversations going. Upon reading that her Uncle Ben had injured his knee, Sarah wrote, “I hope your knee is ok.” When Sam’s grandmother in Canada wrote about snow, Sam wrote about a rare snow in our town.

The children also began to show me that they could write about more than one idea in a letter. At the start of the project, most of the students’ letters

Figure 4 Dylan Asked, “What is Your Favorite Thing About Christmas?”



conveyed just one thought, but gradually they began to write about multiple themes. In the same note that Sarah wished her uncle well with his injured knee, she asked, “How is that dog next door?” The letters in Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7 demonstrate the project for Olivia. She wrote, “You won’t believe it, but on the 2nd of May, I found a snake. It was BIG,” that she was having fun at school, and told her grandparents that she wanted to visit, “I liked cake last time,” and “Heat up the pool!”

Family Ties

The other notable change came from the adults. The out-of-town relatives began sending me letters, e-mailing me, and wanting updates from the classroom. I loved being able to share this with them, and I felt like was truly offering families an opportunity to strengthen bonds across miles. The relatives told me how happy the

mail from the children made them. I began to think that the correspondents waited by the mailbox as much as the children did! As the school year ended, I encouraged the pen pals to keep writing, and I gave the children stationery and writing supplies as my last gifts to them.

I learned a lot from this project. I learned that letter writing makes writing real and that children are indeed motivated by real-life opportunities. Audience played an important role in encouraging children to master the skills and mechanics of writing. I learned that they could write about more than appeared in kindergarten journals. I learned that the more children write, the more they begin to see themselves as writers. Most of all, I learned that I could have a hand in developing those family bonds for my students that I so wish I had developed between my own children and their grandmother.

Figure 5 Olivia Wrote to Her Grandfather That She was Glad She and Katrina were Friends Again. "It's a Long Story"

DEER NANA AND GRAND PA
 NOT ARE YOU DOING
 I MIS YOU IM HAVING
 A GOOD TIME AT SCHOOL
 TAK YOU FREE THE
 GIFT CARD IM GLAD
 [REDACTED] IS MY FRAN A GAN
 ITS A LOVE STORY ♡♡♡
 LOVE [REDACTED] 😊

This study demonstrates that extended families can contribute much to literacy development. The strong desire between the students and their family correspondent to make connections was clear. The children were excited to receive, read, write, and send letters. The family members were also excited to be part of the project and communicated to me through mail, e-mail, and the students' parents how much fun it was for them to get to be an integral part of the kindergarten year despite living too far away for regular visits.

Family members looked for ways to connect to the children. Usually, it was the child who took the first turn in these connecting conversations, typically by mentioning something going on in their lives. The extended family members then took the next turn by elaborating and adding personal stories. I began seeing children taking a third turn in these connected conversations by further extending and adding another personal story. The correspondence began to show a desire to preserve the connections, with frequent requests like "Write soon!" or questions that required a response, such as "How is your dog?"

The correspondents picked up cues that they were invited to participate in the life of the class outside of the letter-writing. Reed's grandmother sent a box of craft supplies addressed to the entire class. One of the students had an aunt who lived in New Orleans. For Mardi Gras, the aunt sent the class bead necklaces, a CD of zydeco music, and a king cake straight from a New Orleans bakery. All of the children wrote thank

you notes to "Aunt Cindy," and in return, Cindy wrote notes back to each child. A few of the children kept writing to Cindy for the rest of the school year, and Cindy kept the mailbox full with notes and other surprises.

Conclusion

The benefits of this project met my original intention of creating a context for family history while providing my

Figure 6 Olivia's Grandfather Wrote a Response About His Best Childhood Friend

Dear [REDACTED]
 I am sending you a balloon message. I hope you like it. Nana made the balloon. It was nice to hear you are having a good time at school.

I am glad you and [REDACTED] are friends again. It is wonderful to have friends.

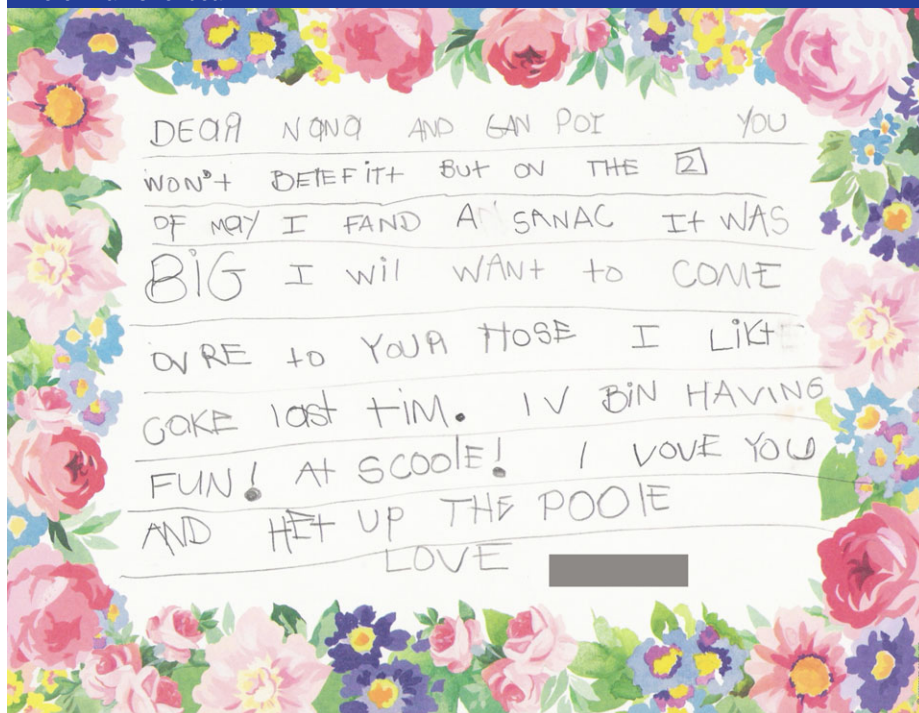
When I was in [REDACTED] last week to see my mother, who is your Great Grandma [REDACTED] I visited an old friend of mine. His name is [REDACTED] and we have been friends since we were your age. That means we have been friends for 56 years. When we were boys, we lived close to each other. A neighbor man built a ladder over his fence so [REDACTED] and I could go back and forth to play together. We liked to climb in a mulberry tree near [REDACTED] University and to play basketball at my house.

Today, [REDACTED] is a barber. He often cuts my hair when I go to [REDACTED] When your cousin [REDACTED] visits your Grandma [REDACTED], [REDACTED] sometimes gives him a haircut, too.

maybe I can meet your friend, and one day you can meet my friend.

Love, Grandpa

Figure 7 By the End of the Project, the Students' Letters were Longer, and Contained More Than One Idea



students with authentic reasons to write. Both my students and their family members learned things about one another that are not part of school curriculum but are worthwhile and supportive of learning. As the year progressed, the children became more and more connected to their family members through the exchange of letters.

In fact, several children and their parents dropped by my classroom the following year and told me that they continued the letter-writing over the summer and into the next school year, and they had no plans to stop. As a teacher, I saw the value of a project like this to motivate my students as writers, to help teach the skills and mechanics of writing, and to show my students and their families the joy in sharing family history through letters.

I conclude by inviting teacher researchers to explore ways to incorporate extended families into the life of the

classroom and to find ways to inspire young children to write often. I believe that teacher research projects such as this can make a significant contribution to research on teaching and learning and are also a model of systematic teacher inquiry that leads to improving practice.

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TAKE ACTION!

1. Before the school year begins, gather the supplies you will need.
2. Ask parents and guardians to identify a correspondent and provide the correspondent's name and address.
3. Send an e-mail or a letter to the correspondent describing the project and what you are asking them to do. Solicit their agreement to participate. If you think you might write about it or present the project at a conference, be sure to let them know.
4. Provide relevant instruction to the children: read books about children who write and letter writers. Teach the skills children need as part of writing activities.
5. Decide how you will organize the data. Will you need file folders for paper? A file structure on a computer for scanned documents?
6. Decide how you will handle routines. Will children have access to the paper and writing supplies, or will you distribute it? What do they do with completed letters? What do you do when mail arrives? Will you scan mail and then send it home?
7. When children can write simple messages—about five words and their names—they are ready to write their first letters.
8. Keep children in the habit of writing while they wait for letters to arrive.
9. Periodically communicate with the correspondents to let them know things about the class and to solicit feedback.

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Appendix A: Study Details

Setting

This study took place in a public school kindergarten in a small southwestern city. The school served about 600 students from pre-K through fifth grade and received Title 1 funding. It is situated in the center of a residential neighborhood and is seen as a focal point in the community. About 55% of the students are Caucasian, 28% are Hispanic, about 11% are African-American, and the remaining students are classified as “other.” Seventeen percent of the students are classified as limited English proficient. About 45% of the students are classified as “economically disadvantaged,” and about 46% have subsidized meals at school. The school was recognized by the state as having exemplary student achievement ratings.

Participants

There were 22 children in this kindergarten class. Eleven qualified for free or reduced-price meals at school. Fourteen of the children had attended preschool the year before; three of

those attended Head Start. Thirteen of the students were girls and nine were boys.

There were 27 relatives who served as correspondents for 21 of the children. One of the children did not have a family member who agreed to participate; this student corresponded with an unrelated volunteer.

As the teacher, I was in my seventh year of teaching kindergarten and had certifications in Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

The Classroom

The school had adopted a scripted reading curriculum that focused on phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency for kindergarten students, but teachers were also permitted to supplement the curriculum, and at the kindergarten level, it was common not to use all of the curriculum package. In this particular classroom, there was a 90-minute literacy block that included teacher read-alouds, shared reading, independent reading, literacy-play stations, shared writing, and independent writing, as well as small-group and whole-group mini-lessons that focused on particular skills. Writing was also incorporated into other content so that children wrote while learning math, science, and social studies concepts.