

Introduction:

“When writing becomes a personal project for children, teachers are freed from cajoling, pushing, pulling, and motivating. The teaching act changes. With a light touch we can guide and extend children’s growth in writing. Also, our teaching becomes more personal and this makes all the difference in the world.”
– Lucy Calkins, The Art of Teaching Writing, 1994.

The purpose of our inquiry project is multi-faceted. First and foremost, we are trying to meet the diverse writing needs of the children in our first and second grade split classroom with the Family Message Journal. The Family Message Journals are an attempt to show students that writing serves many purposes and that it can be integrated across the curriculum. We want our students to become passionate about writing and want to see if a medium such as the Family Message Journal encourages that passion.

A. Background Information - Cheryl’s Perspective:

It was last April when my principal, Charlotte Zmyslo, approached me about attending the teacher Inquiry Conference in May. Since my arrival in State College Area School District I had been hearing about teacher inquiry, but really had no clue how implement inquiry in the classroom. I have always had an inquiring mind, but have never acted on these wonderings.

For me, the summer tends to be a powerful time for reflection. As I sat poolside on a hot, sticky July afternoon, I began to have wonderings about the upcoming school year, and my effectiveness as a teacher. Something I have

always been passionate about is getting my primary students excited about writing. I strive to help them see the relationship between reading and writing. I want my students to understand that writing serves many purposes (writing a story, writing a letter, writing information learned, etc.). I try to incorporate writing into my daily lesson plans, usually through the use of journals.

The biggest problem that I have faced is that the kids think of writing as a chore or “just another assignment”. In this time of reflection, I remembered a teacher resource book that I came across during the Living in Harmony Unit, a thematic unit designed by SCASD for use in the primary grades. It was called Family Message Journals: Teaching Writing through Family Involvement, by Julie Wollman-Bonilla. The basic idea behind these journals is that children are asked to write to their parents on a given topic each day, such as a story response or a science, math, or social studies concept. Students also use the journals as a way to inform parents about school events, field trips, and holidays. The kids then bring their journals home each night, parents respond, and students share their journals the next day.

I immediately began reading through the whole book, and thinking about how I could incorporate this idea into my first and second grade class. I knew that in the fall I would have a PDS intern, so I thought that it was the perfect opportunity to try something new. Erin, my intern, loved the idea and was eager to learn more about how primary children develop their writing skills. I was more interested in what motivates kids to write. I began to wonder: What kind of effect

would the use of Family message Journals have on student attitudes towards writing?

Erin's Perspective:

Before the school year began, I spent time getting the classroom ready for the children with my mentor. We discussed the upcoming year and the units of study, exchanging ideas and experiences. When the topic of starting Family Message Journals came up, I was immediately drawn to the idea. It would be a new, daily writing program for the class that would begin with the Living in Harmony unit and continue throughout the year. We agreed that the Family Message Journals would be a great project for us to collaborate on. Very enthusiastic about the idea, we quickly began to think about how we could implement the program in our classroom. With my first experiences in teaching rapidly approaching, I thought the Family Message Journals would be a great way for me to learn how children learn to write. With children in our class at a wide range of writing abilities, I knew the journals would help me develop skills as a writing teacher.

As the year began, I met and got to know each student in the class. As preliminary reading and math assessments were given, I began to see the students' varied instructional needs. While many of our students began the year at a "typical" stage in writing, there were some students who displayed stronger abilities and some students who were just getting started as readers and writers. As this would be the case with any primary classroom, our combined classroom

had a wider spectrum of abilities than most. The contrasts between the first graders just beginning to write and the second graders who were more advanced in writing were great. As I began to think about this diversity in our classroom, I was led to one of my first wonderings about the new writing program – could the Family Message Journal program meet the needs of students at a wide range of developmental writing stages in our multi-aged classroom?

Our Wonderings:

1. What kind of effect would the use of Family Message Journals have on student attitudes towards writing?
2. Could the Family Message Journals meet the needs of students at a wide range of developmental writing stages in our multi-aged classroom?

B. Inquiry Plan – Cheryl’s Perspective:

On Tuesday, September 20th, 2003, our students completed their first entries in the Family Message Journals. Each day that followed, I began taking notes on how the kids were reacting to these journals - body language, verbal comments, etc. I noticed that many of the first graders and a few reluctant second graders were “less than thrilled” with writing in their journals each day. I heard them making comments like, “This is too hard...I don’t know how to write...I don’t really like writing...I need help...Do we have to do this everyday?”

Between October and December, there was definitely a shift in attitudes from those reluctant writers. I began to hear different types of comments from the

kids, such as “I wonder what we’re going to write about in our Family Message Journals today...Writing is fun...I’m getting good at writing.” I was thrilled when our weakest first grade writer in the class stated, “I want to write more in my journal, I love to write.” It was at this point that I decided to collect more data, so I learn more about the kids’ attitudes about Family Message Journals. Each child was given a survey to fill out which asked the kids to reflect on the Family Message Journals (Appendix C, pg. 91).

Many common themes emerged:

- Positive attitudes about writing
- All the students loved writing to and receiving messages from their families
- Most kids felt that they were good writers
- Many students wanted to work more on punctuation
- All kids felt that journal writing was a fun and worthwhile activity

After reading through the surveys, it was obvious to me that the kids did indeed have positive attitudes about writing, and really enjoyed writing in their journals. What was different about these journals than previous ones? I was determined to find out the answer to this question. My students enjoyed writing more this year than ever before... but WHY? I really wanted and needed to find out what my students’ thoughts on writing. The surveys gave me some insight, but it didn’t give me enough specific information. I decided to do some individual student interviews, thinking that the kids would express themselves more freely as they would not feel the pressure of having to write all of their thoughts down. I also had several small focus group sessions in which we just “talked about

writing”. I would ask a guiding question, and then the conversation between the kids and I just took off.

I asked the following questions during this portion of the data collection:

- Why do you like to write in your Family Message Journals?
- When do you like to write/not like to write?
- What do you like/or not like about writing?
- What makes Family Message Journals fun?
- Is writing important?
- Why do people write?
- Why do you write?
- How has writing in the Family Message Journals helped you become a better writer?

I listened to the recordings of my students’ answers and began to reread their journals and take notes. After analyzing the data, I noticed some common themes emerging.

Erin’s Perspective:

Soon, we decided to try fitting the Family Message Journals into our Literacy Workshop time in the morning. There was already a writing station where students learned writing skills through shared and interactive writing of a class book. Once the book was finished, the students began working on their journal entries for the day while in their small, instructional reading groups at the writing center. We began to discuss the day’s Family Message Journal topic at Morning Meeting and create a word bank prior to Literacy Workshop. As the students began work on their journals in these groups, I was able to give more attention to their development and needs as writers.

I began to see some common themes in the journals of children in the same group. At the suggestion of my mentor, I started to focus on these things with each group as they wrote in their journals at the writing center. For the first few minutes of each group's time at the writing center, I would teach a brief mini-lesson based on questions the children would ask, needed support with, or things my mentor and I noticed in their journals. Depending on the group, my mini-lesson would change. For example, I encouraged the second graders to focus on punctuation and adding details to their writing, while I helped first graders sound spell and use correct spacing.

Data collection began on the first day the children started writing in their Family Message Journals. Their first entries helped us learn more about our students as writers, and we immediately decided that we would keep every journal entry written by each child. As the year progressed, students filled up one journal after another with their writing. We also used student self-evaluations in order to see what the students thought about their development as writers and writing in general. They were all amazed to see the growth they had made mid-year and again towards the end of the year. They were able to notice their own progress in handwriting, length of messages, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and detail. (Appendix C, pg. 91)

In order to effectively assess the students' development as writers, I decided to choose a few students to represent the class as a whole rather than analyze the Family Message Journals of the entire class. I decided on seven students, each at a different stage of writing development at the beginning of the

school year. Three first graders – a writer “just getting started”, a typical writer, and an advanced writer – as well as four second graders – a Title I student, a reluctant writer, a typical writer, and an advanced writer – were the subjects of my focus. I looked through their old journals for messages that were indicative of the growth they had made. I 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. I used State College Area School District’s *Language Arts Continuum: Writing* as well as the *K-6 Language Arts and Social Studies: Curriculum Guide for Parents* to help me assess the students’ strengths and areas of growth. I determined at which stage of writing they began and ended the year.

Part C. What We Learned – Cheryl’s Perspective:

After analyzing the data I collected from student interviews, I noticed several common themes emerging from the students’ responses. I was able to make several claims concerning the students’ attitudes and feelings about writing. Using evidence from literature on writing and Family Message Journals as well as the data collected from the students, I am able to support these claims with concrete evidence.

Claim 1- Writing to parents has made journal writing a meaningful activity. The children have an audience, and feel as if their writing has authenticity- it’s “real writing” for a “real audience”.

I have noticed that there is a direct correlation with student and parent entries. Parent entries have had a very positive impact on student entries- when students read parent responses filled with questions, praise, and some anecdotes, it seems to motivate them tremendously. The children can't wait to write in their journals again. Julie Wollman-Bonilla, author of Family Message Journals, explains that real purposes show children the value and uses of writing; real audiences provide "communicative potential" (Wollman Bonilla, 70). She continues to say that when students share their writing with their families, it allows them to act on their desire to communicate with others. This statement becomes very evident in the comments made by some of the children during student interviews:

"I like writing letters to my mom because my mom writes back to me."

"It is like spending time with an invisible mom or dad. Your mom or dad might write you a funny note, then when you're at school, and reading the message journal, you feel like one of them is with you."

"It is special because you're writing to your family. I like what they say about my writing, and they can know what I am thinking."

Clearly, these comments demonstrate that writing has a purpose for our students. They feel as if writing to their parents is a meaningful activity, it is not just another assignment my teacher is going to collect and put in a portfolio. I realize now that my previous writing program was lacking a very important component: MEANING! Students improve their writing when the tasks assigned are "authentic"- that is, when the writing addresses a specific purpose and a real audience (Cole, 1995). As I read through student journals, a several entries truly

modeled meaningful dialogues between students and parents. During our Living in Harmony unit, the children were asked to write about special family times.

Child 1 requested that her family go horseback riding more often, then thanked her mom for taking care of her. Child 1's mother responded with a heartwarming childhood story about when she rode horses:

*I would love to go riding with you and collect more wonderful memories. I love horses almost as much as you do (almost...)
P.S. It is my honor and my pleasure to take care of you as you grow into a lovely and kind young lady. (Appendix B, pg. 75-77).*

On the 100th day of school, Child 2 asked his mom how many days of school she had when she was a girl. She replied:

I had the same number of days as you have, maybe more. I loved school. We used to eat lunch in the All Purpose Room... (Appendix B, pg.78-80).

During our Land of Make-Believe unit, Child 3 tells her dad about a fractured fairy tale entitled, The Three Wolves and the Big Bad Pig. He had a very witty response for her:

I never heard of such a crazy story as the 3 little wolves and the big, bad, pig but it sounds funny. I like your idea for the little chipmunks and the big, bad fox. How about the 3 "Smith" sisters and the big, bad, daddy? You could write a story about you and your two sisters playing tricks on me. (Appendix B, pg. 81).

One journal topic asked the children what they would do if "Tinkerbell" sprinkled pixie dust on them. Child 4 that she would keep it in a special place so no one could find it. Her mother replied:

If Tinkerbell sprinkled me with pixie dust, I would wish to live in a white house in State College and have 2 kids, a girl, and a boy. Maybe I have already been sprinkled with pixie dust. (Appendix B, pg. 82-83).

I am so thrilled with the high level of effort the parents have put forth towards the Family message Journals. It is obvious that the kids and parents have become attached to this project. Child 5's parent writes:

I can't believe we have filled up this entire Family Message Journal book this fall . It has been a lot of fun, don't you think? I look forward to doing more Family Message Journals with you in the future. (Appendix B, pg. 84).

The parents' participation with the Family Message Journals has certainly contributed to the positive attitudes my students have about writing.

Claim 2- The daily journaling has led to more confidence in the area of writing.

Children see the value in writing everyday and how daily writing has helped them become better writers. These feelings are evident in the student interviews I conducted. Students responded to my questions with comments such as:

"I like any kind of writing. It is easier now because you just get used to it."

"I am a faster writer because I practice writing everyday."

"I can write more than I did last year."

In the article, "How to Create Competent, Eager Writers", the author stresses the importance of teaching the kids to write by writing: "Many youngsters freely and happily shoot baskets, hit a tennis ball back and forth across the net, or play soccer without training long before skills are brought into

play. Aspiring artists want and need drill instruction only after they have experienced the feel of clay squishing between their fingers or experimented with paints over and over again. Yet, way before students know what writing is all about, they are inundated with skill instruction.” (Azemove, 2001). Unfortunately many classrooms in the country use this format to teach kids how to write. In our class, the Family Message Journals are used as a springboard for learning new writing skills. The students want to learn new writing techniques or skills because they are writing to “real people”. Journal writing is so much more meaningful than a skill sheet.

Each day, Erin and I selected 2 “WOW!” writers. “WOW!” writers were chosen for a number of reasons – neat handwriting, details, punctuation, etc. These students got to read their journal entries to classmates during the Morning Meeting. New writing skills were modeled through student work. Erin and I would encourage the class to use these writing skills by saying things like, “Oh, listen to the dazzling words Erik has used to help us picture the fish in our minds!” According to Lucy Calkins in The Art of Teaching Writing, “Our students will also catch the magic from each other- if we let them. This means that we must focus at least in part on the very best writers in the room, extending what they can do and celebrating their successes...because success is contagious” (Calkins, 1994, pg. 36).

The kids in our class love to write everyday. They understand that with practice their writing improves over time. Recently, our students reflected on their writing progress by comparing a journal that was written in October, to their

present journal. We heard chuckles from all over the classroom: “I can’t believe that I used to write like that- with all capital letters...I didn’t even use periods back in October.” During student interviews, most kids explained that they were good writers because they practice writing everyday. One student proudly states, “Writing is easy now because it’s been a long time...I’ve been writing for 94 days!”

Claim 3- Our students like that they are given some choice within the daily writing topics.

Although our students were given a curriculum related topic each day, Family Message Journals were an open-ended assignment. They were not given a certain format or told they must add certain things. We discussed many different ways that they could tackle a journal entry. A word bank was created and student ideas were shared. Throughout the year, the students were encouraged to add personal events and anecdotes to their journal entries. In a response to reading The Stinky Cheese Man, one student wrote, “This book reminds me of my baby sisters because they have smelly diapers.” One student explained why he likes writing in his Family Message Journal during an interview, stating, “You feel like you can write down your own ideas. I like when we write about real authors.”

Claim 4- The kids enjoy working independently in their journals.

Erin and I worked hard to provide reasonable, but high expectations for the journal assignments. There were never a required number of sentences or pages to write each day. The kids knew that an assignment was done when they could say to themselves, “This is “WOW!” work!” Structuring journal time in this format led to some positive feedback about writing in the Family Message

Journals:

“I can write as much as I want.”

“I like writing in the journals because it’s not like you are in a big hurry, you get to take your time. It’s fun to write, it’s a quiet time, you don’t have to rush through it...and you don’t have to copy anyone.”

Claim 5- Our students have learned that writing serves many purposes.

They like writing because it’s useful to them.

In the past, when I would ask kids to explain why people write, most kids would answer, “to write a story”. They really had no idea that writing could be useful in other ways, and that people use writing in their everyday lives. In our classroom, “writing has become more than just a part of the curriculum,” as the students have developed “an awareness of the value of the written word and are using it for their own purposes (Hamilton, 2001, pg. 9). This year I got different responses when I asked the kids, “Why do people write, and why is writing important?” I received answers such as:

- To communicate with others
- You can write letters to people
- To talk to people
- To learn new things
- To write a “How-to” Book
- To teach people new things
- You can write a science experiment or a math problem

- My dad has to write things down for his work
- My mom has to type things on the computer
- Writing helps you learn
- Writing helps you spell
- You can study your writing

The children in our classroom have written about a variety of topics, and for a variety of purposes. Our journal entry topics this year covered every subject area, and were also used by the students as a way to communicate important information about something happening at school, such as a speaker, a field trip, or an assembly. It is quite a magical thing when children, “discover the power of writing to get things done, influence others, share ideas and experiences,” (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, pg. 13). I will never forget the joy I felt when one of my students included his Christmas list in a journal entry. I thought, “Wow, this child really gets it! He realizes that writing does serve a purpose!” Soon other kids “were able to use their messages to achieve their own functions as well as those intended by their teachers (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001, pg. 73). Students write:

I hope psu wins to night. (Appendix B, pg. 85)

When are we going to read lostr [Red Lobster]? (Appendix B, pg. 86)

Reember I have football pratdis. (Appendix B, pg. 88)

Our students have embraced the concept of writing, and thoroughly enjoy writing in their journals each day. They often tried to teach their parents new information that they learned at school. One child wrote: “Did you know that the largest wave was 112 feet, or that the tides are caused by the moon?”

The parents often included questions in their responses. The kids couldn't wait to open up their journals and see what their parents had written to them.

Claim 6- The kids like that they can express their feelings in the Family Message Journals.

The children were always encouraged to express their feelings when writing in their Family Message Journals- whether it was in reference to a book read, a field trip, speaker, or math concept. They also used the journals to express unhappiness with a situation. Child 6 demonstrated this so well:

I mean it that I am not going to gymnastics...and I mean it! (Appendix B, pg. 89)

These claims have really helped me to understand why students love to write this year, and why the Family Message Journals have been so successful. The Family Message Journals have provided the kids with six qualities that have helped them feel their writing is truly their own:

- Meaning
- Choice
- Independence
- Daily Practice
- Purposeful writing on a variety of topics
- Self-expression
- Confidence

These qualities have helped the students gain “ownership” of their writing.

Everything that our students' write belongs to them... in every sense of the word!

Erin's Perspective:

After carefully analyzing the data collected from the Family Message Journals, I can enthusiastically make two claims about our students' development as writers and support these claims with evidence from literature and student data.

Claim 1: The Family Message Journals do meet the developmental writing needs of all students in our class.

Whether an experienced writer or just starting out, each child has made progress. The State College Area School District's *K-6 Language Arts and Social Studies: A Curriculum Guide for Parents* lists a district statement that reads, "We believe that this kind of curriculum serves the educational needs of students of all backgrounds and ability levels," and that each student is able to "make progress in individually determined ways". The "kind of curriculum" the Curriculum Guide describes includes several developmentally appropriate practices for young children that are met by the Family Message Journal program. Although the practices are divided by grade level, we were able to meet several suggested first and second grade teaching points daily.

One of the first grade teaching practices named by the *Curriculum Guide for Parents* is supporting vocabulary development. The students' vocabulary development was supported by transcribing their language, especially early in the year for some of our first grade children. We helped students build lists of

common words, another practice suggested by the *Curriculum Guide for Parents*, by creating a “word bank” as a class to help them when writing their entries. The word bank also helped us introduce new words, and teach word study strategies such as using letter sounds and word and sentence structure, which is also supported by the *Curriculum Guide for Parents*.

The *Curriculum Guide for Parents* also stresses the importance of modeling strategies for students. Both teachers and other students in the room modeled strategies for writing in the journals. Early in the year, journal entries were modeled on the board. As the students became more proficient at writing in the journals, “WOW!” writers were selected to read their messages. “WOW!” writers might have used proper punctuation and capitalization, added lots of detail, used describing words, or added something special of their own, like an extension of the topic or a question to their parents. At Morning Meeting, the “WOW!” writer read their message as the teacher prompted the class to listen for or look at the writer’s “WOW!” work. We found that the students responded well to being chosen as a “WOW!” writer, causing them to strive to include the characteristics of a “WOW!” writer in their work.

To further model these “WOW!” strategies for writing, we added an “I am a WOW Writer!” checklist to Family Message Journal time (Appendix C, pg. 92). Each child was supplied with a checklist, which named seven characteristics of a “WOW!” journal entry. These characteristics included: writing the date at the top of the entry, including a greeting and a closing, using neat handwriting, using periods and capital letters when needed, adding details, and sticking to the topic.

With this checklist, the students were able to assess themselves as they wrote. Before turning in their Family Message Journal to be sent home, students were required to go over the list and make sure all characteristics were included. All students, regardless of where they were on the spectrum of writing stages, were able to meet all seven characteristics listed.

The Family Message Journal program met several of the suggested teaching practices for second graders as well. The *Curriculum Guide for Parents* states that children should be taught to write in multiple forms. The Family Message Journal allowed the students to explore several types of writing. First and foremost, students learned how to compose a friendly letter. They learned to write for an audience and give information. For example, following a field trip, the students might write a few facts about the place visited and add some of their favorite parts of the trip. After a social studies map lesson about the oceans, students wrote several facts about what they had learned that day. We found that the students loved “teaching” their parents things they had learned in school. After learning about the four oceans, one second grader wrote, “*Dear Daddy, Today we did a map activity. Did you know that the Pacific is the biggest and deepest ocean? The Pacific Ocean is the deepest ocean because of the Mariana Trench that is almost 7 miles long!*” (Appendix A, pg. 72).

Students also had the opportunity to use creativity in their writing when taking another’s point of view. During the Pioneer unit, students took on the role of a pioneer family member and wrote in their Family Message Journals from that

person's point of view. They were encouraged to think about what a pioneer might be seeing, feeling, and doing on their journey out west.

Another strategy emphasized by the *Curriculum Guide for Parents* is teaching revising, editing, and proofreading skills. Each day, after writing their journal entries, the students were reminded to read over what they had written. The "I am a WOW Writer!" checklist aided students in looking back over their work and making corrections. Students might also share their journal with another student and have a peer-editing conference. Also, while working with small groups at the Writing Center, common mistakes in punctuation and capitalization in the Family Message Journals were turned into mini-lessons or Morning Messages for the next day. The class practiced proofreading a Morning Message for mistakes in capitalization and missing periods, question marks, and commas. After these activities, the students were encouraged to check their own work in their Family Message Journal before turning it in.

We were also able to "create a climate that fosters analytic, evaluative, and reflective thinking", another important skill listed in the *Curriculum Guide for Parents*. During the Land of Make-Believe unit, students frequently responded to literature in their Family Message Journals. They compared and contrasted fairy tales, wrote about characters who reminded them of someone they knew, and wrote book reviews of fairy tales read to them or that they read independently.

The *Curriculum Guide for Parents* also stresses several things parents can do to help foster their child's writing development. The Family Message Journal program helped parents meet these needs by allowing them to become

involved in school activities and show interest in their child's learning through responding in the journal. Suggesting that children write to friends and relations and encouraging children to share what they have learned, two more needs met by the Family Message Journals, are also recommended.

Claim 2: Every student in our class was able to make progress in writing.

Perhaps the best evidence of diverse sets of needs being met is the journals themselves. When reading over the students' entries from the entire year, their growth as writers is apparent. The students' progress is seen in a number of areas. Improvement in ideas (creativity and quality), focus, fluency or ease in writing, mechanics, and handwriting is seen in every student's Family Message Journal entries. The seven students chosen to "showcase" the growth made by the entire class are indeed representative of our diverse classroom population (Appendix A, pg. 30 – 73).

In order to assess the growth students in the class had made as writers, I chose 7 students of varying writing ability and instructional needs. A first grader just beginning to write at the preconventional stage, a typical first grade writer at the emergent stage, and an advanced first grade writer at the late emergent stage indicate the diversity in our classroom only among 9 first grade students. A Title I reading student at the developing stage, a second grader just starting to write at the developing stage, a typical second grade writer at the late developing stage, and an advanced second grade writer at the beginning stage represent the spectrum of writing skills for the other half of our class. Three entries from

each student, from the beginning, middle, and end of the year help illustrate their growth as writers. Each of these students was able to make considerable progress in their writing skills during the school year, showing that the Family Message Journal meets the needs of students at a wide range of writing stages.

At the beginning of the year, Child A, a first grader, demonstrated skills at the preconventional level, according to *The Language Arts Continuum: Writing* (LAC), published by State College Area School District in 2003. He drew pictures of the topic for the day, wrote random letters without spaces to tell his story, and signed his name at the bottom. He was able to copy some words from the word bank and dictate a story to a teacher. To help with spacing, a teacher drew lines on Child A's paper to help him separate words (Appendix A, pg. 31 - 33). By January, Child A was writing on his own, spacing words, and forming complete sentences using sound spelling and sight words. He could also write from another's point of view, as he wrote this entry from a pioneer's point of view: "*Dear Famule, I am wrcing So hrd on the Farm. I gat the ags for bac is. I mlc the caos for mlc. I git Fird word for the fir. [Dear Family, I am working so hard on the farm. I get the eggs for breakfast. I milk the cows for milk. I get fire wood for the fire.]*" (Appendix A, pg. 34). By April, Child A was writing with more focus by having a topic sentence at the beginning of his entry. While writing was still a bit tedious for him, he was writing with much more ease than at the beginning of the year. He continued to write full sentences with punctuation and use sound spelling to write tricky words. His handwriting and letter formation had improved as well. At this point, Child A could also reread what he had written. In April,

Child A was at an emergent level, and continued to improve daily (Appendix A, pg. 35).

The “typical” first grade writer I have chosen, Child B, wrote at the emergent stage at the beginning of the school year. According to the LAC, emergent writers “use sound spelling to write some familiar words... These words may include only beginning and ending consonants” (LAC, 2003, pg. 1.4). Child B also drew a picture to tell a story and interchanged lower and upper case letters as she wrote from left to right. She was able to reread what she had written, although some words were represented by just two or three letters, like this sample from September: *“Dear dad I LiKe Wn Wie go in to the Mov Ftr Kn We go in to The Mov Ftr A gn I RI Wet to Se A Mov Wth You PS I RI Wt You to Km into SoL And et WStH Me [Dear Dad, I like when we go to the movie theater. Can we go to the movie theater again? I really want to see a movie with you. P.S. I really want you to come into school an eat with me.]* (Appendix A, pg. 36 – 37). By January, Child B was adding many more vowels to her words and using capital and lower case letters correctly. Her sound spelling and handwriting had also improved. She showed focus as she stayed on topic, writing from a pioneer’s point of view and describing feelings in complete sentences (Appendix A, pg. 38 - 39). By April, Child B continued to make progress in all areas. She wrote more complex sentences with improved focus, added more details, and improved her spelling as she wrote at a developing level (Appendix A, pg. 40 - 42).

Child C is the advanced first grader writer I have chosen to profile. In September, Child C was writing at the late emergent level. She had neat handwriting and wrote with mainly lower case letters and capitals where needed. Although Child C did not punctuate her sentences, she capitalized the first letter of the word that would start a new sentence (*"Dear Daddy, We read a story called I Like Me It teaches us to be happy with who we are..."*) She wrote with focus and provided details about the topic (Appendix A, pg. 43 - 44). By the middle of the year, Child C was punctuating her sentences and adding describing words. She was also able to write with the voice of a pioneer child who was traveling west (Appendix A, pg. 45 - 46). Towards the end of the year, Child C continued to make progress in all areas and wrote at the developing stage. She used proper capitalization, punctuation and was able to proofread and revise her work (Appendix A, pg. 47).

One of the four second graders I chose to profile is Child D, a Title I reading student. His difficulties in reading carried over to his writing, making him a very reluctant writer at the beginning of the year. Child D wrote at the early developing level in September, writing simple sentences with some punctuation. He used sound spelling to spell most words and was beginning to use capitalization, writing entries such as, *"Dear Dad and Mom I like to go to pool. I like when we go to vackation to canada my family"* (Appendix A, pg. 48). At the middle of the year, Child D was making gains in his reading skills as well as his writing skills. His focus improved greatly and he was using punctuation and capital letters where needed (Appendix A, pg. 49). In April, Child D's writing was

at the beginning stage, as he wrote more complete sentences, used end punctuation, and was able to proofread and edit his own work (Appendix A, pg. 50 - 52). According to the guidelines in the LAC, Child D had progressed to the beginning level by the end of the school year.

Child E is a second grader who demonstrated skills at the developing level as well. Child E was also a bit of a reluctant writer who often lacked focus and motivation. His Family Message Journal entries in the beginning of the year showed that he was able to use sound spelling to spell most words, with the exception of some frequently used words, and read his own writing. Child E was beginning to use some capitalization and punctuation in the simple sentences he wrote. His writing lacked focus and seemed to “jump around” at times. For example, a September entry about his family read: *“Dear mom an Dad there are so meny pepell in are Famely they dont Fit in the Picher. Mom when is Movey nite and bing go nite? Wye is are famely Speshll mom in the winter Will Dad take us to go sledin and mom I very frusdad about 3^d gade...”* (Appendix A, pg. 53 - 56). Child E’s writing skills quickly took off by the middle of the year. His entries during the Pioneer unit showed more detail, focus, and proper capitalization and punctuation. His handwriting had also shown improvement (Appendix A, pg. 57 - 58). According to the LAC, Child E displayed skills at the beginning level towards the end of the year. He used sound spelling and was making a transition into conventional spelling as he wrote more complete sentences and stayed on topic. He wrote with a lot of detail and had developed a “voice” as a writer. He was also able to read over and edit his own work (Appendix A, pg. 59 - 60).

Child F was a “typical” second grade writer at the beginning of the year. At the late developing stage, Child F wrote simple sentences with most necessary capitalization and punctuation. He stayed on topic and wrote several details about the day’s topic (Appendix A, pg. 61- 62). During the Pioneer unit at the middle of the year, Child F’s writing became more creative and focused as he wrote from a pioneer child’s point of view. “We need to get to America for a better life,” he wrote. *“Mom and I are trieing so hard to take care of grandpa and Mikey and Mariel.”* His writing also had an observable beginning, middle, and end (Appendix A, pg. 63 – 64). By April, Child F’s demonstrated skills at the late beginning level as he used more proper punctuation and wrote more complex sentences. He was able to focus on the topic and present ideas in a logical order. Child F was also able to effectively revise and edit his own writing (Appendix A, pg. 65).

The advanced second grade writer I chose to profile is Child G. At the beginning of the year, Child G was already writing with the skills of a late beginning writer. She wrote complete sentences with end punctuation and was starting to write compound sentences. Child G also added a good deal of relevant detail to her writing (Appendix A, pg. 66 - 67). During the Pioneer unit, Child G wrote messages that were very creative and descriptive, and had developed a writer’s “voice”. She wrote: *“Dear Mother, Today we left from Germany to America...The journey is full of people getting seasick. Some people have or got the fever... America, it sounds like liberty! I hope we arrive soon.”* (Appendix A, pg. 68 - 69). Later in the year, Child G continued to improve

her writing skills, almost always using necessary punctuation and capitalization and creating longer messages, typical characteristics of an expanding writer (LAC, 2003). She added descriptive language to informational messages and directed her messages towards her audience. She added lots of relevant facts and details and kept focus as she wrote her messages (Appendix A, pg. 70 - 73).

The examples of messages that these seven students produced throughout the year are clearly indicative of growth in writing. Each child was able to make considerable progress during the year, as they practiced writing skills daily in their Family Message Journals. In addition, each student has achieved the benchmark writing skills typical for their grade level, and some have even progressed above and beyond grade level.

D. Conclusions, Future Directions, and New Wonderings

Looking towards our future classrooms, we can definitely say that this inquiry had led to plans for our future practice. After witnessing the growth of the students in our class this year as they enthusiastically embraced the Family Message Journals, we plan to implement the program in our future classrooms, whatever grades they may be. The inquiry has also sparked new wonderings for us:

1. How could the Family Message Journal be adapted to meet the writing needs of older children, such as fourth or fifth graders?
2. What would Family Message Journals look like in a different demographic setting?

The positive effects of Family Message Journals have shown us that writing in a meaningful way for an audience allows students to grow as writers. We feel that the Family Message Journals have helped us develop as teachers. We have witnessed students' writing growth at all areas of the spectrum of writing stages and understand the needs of students of all developmental writing abilities. Through this inquiry, we have concluded that the Family Message Journals have given the students an "ownership" of their writing, leading to a more positive attitude towards writing in general. We feel this positive attitude has further led to the significant growth and achievement in writing we have seen during this school year.

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