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**A WRITING BOX FOR EVERY CHILD:
CHANGING STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING
WRITING IN A FIRST AND SECOND GRADE
CLASSROOM**

A Dissertation Presented

by

SHARON A. EDWARDS

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

February 1997

School of Education

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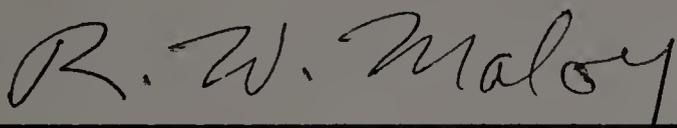
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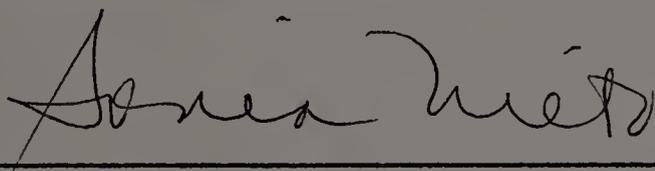
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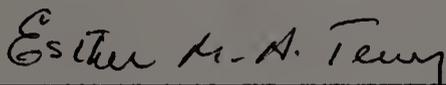
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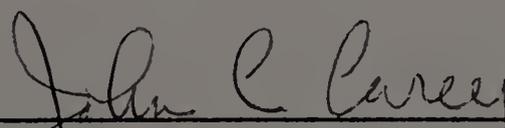
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Esther M. A. Terry, Member



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This dissertation is dedicated to the immense creativity and learning displayed by children with their Writing Boxes throughout the eight years of the project.

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My parents, Flora and Roy Edwards, originally guided me to teach. Thank you both.

Extraordinary thinkers led me to this study and assisted its course throughout eight years. I am in their debt for what I have learned from each of them. Without their ideas, insights, questions, and conversations, this dissertation would not be. My collaboration with these individuals has made daily work exciting, enlightening and compelling. What more interesting challenge can there be to do than to teach and learn?

Byrd L. Jones lived the life of researcher, teacher, thinker, and trailblazer in education. He directed the course of this dissertation for as long as he could. In his memory this project speaks of what he held important above all else—the ability of adults and children to learn when the conditions for learning support their interests and their drive to know.

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ABSTRACT

A WRITING BOX FOR EVERY CHILD: CHANGING STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING WRITING IN A FIRST AND SECOND GRADE CLASSROOM

FEBRUARY 1997

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This dissertation documents new curriculum and instructional strategies for teaching writing in a first and second grade classroom during the eight years of the Writing Box project. It is a first-person account of ongoing change as I, the teacher-researcher experienced and understood it. My descriptions of change and children's writing samples show how teaching practices and learning activities developed and evolved through incorporating writing at the core of student learning. My experiences demonstrate how substantive change can occur in elementary schools through the efforts of a teacher and students working together to create successful academic achievement.

One hundred seventy-five first and second graders were given Writing Boxes to use at home and they were in a classroom that featured writing across the curriculum. Six conclusions are drawn from their experiences. First, choice of writing materials makes a difference in how willing children are to write. Interesting, open-ended materials are prerequisites for children to write all year. Second, teachers must create many writing times throughout the day. My students

wrote during regularly scheduled writing times as well as before school began, during snack and “you-choose” time, and at recess and lunch.

Third, how teachers talk with children about writing is crucial to children becoming active writers. I changed my vocabulary and approach to emphasize that children are writers right now with ideas and pictures in their heads to communicate to others through text. Fourth, process models for teaching writing based on the experiences of adult writers must be modified to create “a writing process fit for a child.” This child-centered approach includes diverse ways of opening up writing, generating first drafts, revising and editing, and publishing.

Fifth, writing can be integrated into the study of mathematics, science and social studies using “I Wonder” journals, fiction-nonfiction stories, and math comics. Finally, computers and other technologies promote writing. Having more than one computer in the classroom allowed me to do more small group instruction with writing. The machines provide different ways to write and to publish while supporting children’s creativity and self-expression.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vii
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
 Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Purpose of the Study	6
Significance of the Study	8
Limitations of the Study	11
Definition of Terms	11
Young Children's Writing	12
Process Writing	13
Invented Spelling	14
Nongraded Schools	15
Combined Grade Classrooms	15
2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	16
Children's Literacy Learning	16
Literacy Learning Before Entering School	18
Young Children's Writing Development	23
Learning in School	28
Traditional Approaches to the Teaching of Writing	32
Whole Language Approaches to Learning	36
Whole Language and Process Writing	39

Whole Language Teaching in Schools	43
Home-School Connections for Writing	48
Collaborations for Learning and School Change.....	54
Conclusions	58
3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS	61
Setting of the Study	62
Information Collection.....	64
Presentation of the Findings.....	66
4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY	68
Public and Personal Communications.....	68
Signs	70
Morning Messages.....	76
Letters and Cards	78
Classroom Mailboxes.....	80
Connecting Letter Writing with Reading	83
The Before Noon News	86
Weather and News.....	87
Menus.....	89
Poetry	93
Acrostic Poetry.....	97
Poems in Two Voices.....	100
Haiku Poetry	102
Fiction and Nonfiction Stories	105

Imaginative Story Writing	107
Stories from Home	110
Exploring Fiction and Nonfiction.....	113
“I Wonder” Journals	118
Asking Questions/Investigating Answers.....	120
Questions in Mathematics, Science and Social Studies	124
Managing “I Wonder” Journals.....	127
Technology in the Classroom	131
Initial Connections Between Computers and Writing	132
New Technologies Offer New Writing Possibilities	135
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	138
New Strategies for Teaching Writing to Young Children.....	140
Conclusion 1: Writing Materials for Every Child	142
Conclusion 2: New Classroom Structures Promote Writing.....	145
Conclusion 3: New Strategies for Talking about Writing	148
Conclusion 4: Writing Processes Fit for a Child	150
Conclusion 5: Exploring Multiple Genres.....	159
Conclusion 6: Technology Promotes Writing	165
APPENDIX: CHILDREN’S WRITING SAMPLES.....	168
BIBLIOGRAPHY	182

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 A writing process model	41
4.1 Daily morning message format	77
4.2 Computers and software in a writing process classroom.....	132

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
4.1 Reminder to Ms. Edwards.....	169
4.2 Do not touch sign.....	170
4.3 Clock shop sign.....	171
4.4 Wrist watch sign.....	172
4.5 Weather report.....	173
4.6 Fantasy menu.....	174
4.7 Realistic menu.....	175
4.8 Birthday card to Rosa Parks.....	176
4.9 I love you poem.....	177
4.10 Two-voice poem.....	178
4.11 "I Wonder" journal entry.....	179
4.12 "I Wonder" journal entry.....	180
4.13 A child's survey.....	181

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In 23 years of public elementary school teaching as a Demonstration Teacher of five through eight-year-olds at the Mark's Meadow Laboratory School, I have experienced two careers. The first, lasting 15 years, was marked by my struggling efforts to understand how to "cover the curriculum" through an eclectic set of methods to assist every child to learn. The second, the past eight years, is marked by the introduction of a curriculum innovation into my teaching that changed the classroom structure, my daily schedule, how I group children for instruction, my approaches to the teaching of writing, and all of my understandings about children's learning. How this one small innovation came to exert such sweeping influence over my beliefs and behaviors is the story told in this study.

In 1988, I initiated the Writing Box project in my classroom to encourage families to promote young children's writing at home. The Writing Box, a package of writing materials designed to go home with each child, included pencils, erasers, scented watercolor markers, crayons, colored pencils, scissors, a gluestick, different sizes and colors of paper, notebooks (large and small, lined and unlined), a stapler, a ruler with templates of shapes to trace, a small chalkboard with chalk and eraser, cellophane tape, an empty plastic bag, and two pencil sharpeners, one a small world globe that detaches from its stand, the other a simple sharpener. These were all stored in a plastic "sweater size" container with an interlocking top that doubled as a lap desk. While the materials appear to emphasize artistic endeavors, I called them writing materials because so many children do not think of themselves as writers, but do think of themselves as

being able to draw. Labeling the Writing Box and its utensils as writing tools opened new avenues for their use as well as a new definition of writing.

For the past eight school years (1988-89 through 1995-96) every student in my class has received a Writing Box to keep for their own use at home—a total of more than 175 youngsters. A small research grant from the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst originally funded the first two years of the project; donations from manufacturers, and personal funds have paid for the Writing Boxes since. To explain ways for adults to encourage children's writing outside of school, I developed "The Writing Box Home Writing Guide" with the assistance of a University research partner and an undergraduate student intern (Edwards, Maloy & Kubin, 1989). Seven of the eight years of the study, I have conducted evening meetings, with childcare provided, to discuss children's writing and to ask parents and family members to share experiences about what was happening with writing at home. These meetings have expanded my knowledge of how children's literacy develops in school and at home.

In 1990, after being nominated by another teacher at Mark's Meadow School, the State Farm Insurance Companies and the National Council of Teachers of English awarded me the first Good Neighbor Award for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching for the development of the Writing Box and for my related work with home involvement in children's writing. This recognition inspired wide interest among other adults about the Writing Box and its connection for literacy development between home and school.

The award propelled my co-authoring, *Kids Have All the Write Stuff: Inspiring Your Children to Put Pencil* to Paper* (Edwards & Maloy, 1992). An easy-to read, how-to guide for adults, the book features hundreds of ways for parents, teachers, grandparents, and caregivers to inspire and sustain young

children's desire to write. The ideas are drawn from the experiences of children and adults in homes and schools that we worked with during our first three years of research about ways to encourage young children to write. Since the publication of the book, Robert Maloy and I have conducted over 350 workshops for children and adults to acquaint them with new ideas and strategies for writing while continuing our ongoing research about young writers in my classroom.

Investigating children's writing transformed my thinking about how youngsters, specifically six, seven, and eight year-olds, learn successfully in homes and schools. Interviewing parents about what children did with the Writing Box materials, I discovered an amazingly different array of writing by my students that I had not seen in the classroom. I found younger and older brothers and sisters using the writing implements as readily as the siblings who had received a Writing Box. I learned how parents and other adults support and sustain writing as a regular feature of family life.

This dissertation describes how my efforts to promote children's writing at home generated unplanned new approaches to teaching and learning, dramatically changing the classroom from eight years ago. Writing alters the physical arrangement of the classroom, children's learning activities, the way students are grouped for instruction, the number of adults in the room assisting students, the way adults and children interact with each other, and the ways that writing is included in all of the curriculum—language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and technology. New avenues for children to succeed academically and socially have been promoted by the implementation of a writing process fit for a child that facilitates the growth of youngsters' self-esteem and their desire to learn.

Statement of the Problem

My long held beliefs about literacy learning distanced children from writing as a form of personal expression. I equated writing with successfully mastering the skills of spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure—not with creative communication of ideas. I did not know how all the knowledge children possessed when they entered school would assist their learning about written language through their own writing. Therefore as I watched children learn, I saw evidence supporting my misconceptions, not evidence revealing what children already knew about oral and written communication. Children who entered school knowing letter names and sounds appeared to me better able to learn about written language quickly and to understand what school wanted them to learn. Children who did not know as much of that information I assessed as immediately lagging behind others in their learning.

During the two years before the Writing Box project began, my daily classroom writing time focused on children's fiction stories and personal narratives. Writing was not integrated into any other curriculum area. Not all children were equally enthusiastic about writing, but they did all enjoy sitting and talking with one another while they wrote and illustrated their stories. I did not consider myself a writer and neither did the interns and volunteers in the classroom whose work also involved them in learning about children's writing. Assessments of students' reading knowledge were not connected with assessments of their writing knowledge because I did not know at the time how one supported the other. I did not expect children with special education plans or who were working with the Chapter 1 teacher to become prolific readers and fluent writers, but I did expect them to write with the class, so they did.

To respond to my concerns about children's success with reading and writing, I had requested the assistance of a newly hired Writing Coach in the

Amherst Schools throughout these two years. She visited my classroom weekly to teach me how to help children move ahead more quickly in their reading and writing knowledge. At her suggestion I initiated a daily 45 minute writing time into the classroom schedule. It was immediately apparent that children enjoyed writing from their own ideas and writing time became one of their favorites in the class. But even after two years of including writing process into the daily language arts experiences of youngsters, I found that the same numbers of students were experiencing frustration with reading and writing as had been before I instituted a writing focus into our daily learning.

When I questioned the Writing Coach about what we might do the following year to help the children who were not writing and reading with confidence and ease, her reply, "Some kids are writers!" focused my attention and thinking about why this appeared to be so. What factors would make some kids writers and others not? Were home literacy experiences as or more important than school experiences? Perhaps if I could replicate the experiences of the children who came to school able to write easily for kids who were less able to express themselves readily, the differences in learning success would be erased. This thinking inspired my research question that initiated the Writing Box project, "If we got materials into children's homes and acquainted families with how children's writing develops, would more children experience success with writing?"

Gradually, throughout the first year of the Writing Box project, writing emerged as a key to children's literacy development, and for some, a key to their social relationships in the classroom. The three kids who brought writing to school from home regularly as the result of having Writing Boxes at home also learned to read more quickly and easily than most of those who did not. That writing was assisting these children's reading development seemed an important

reason for me to pursue every child's becoming able to write more regularly at school. Although I realized that writing enabled reading development, I did not yet see its power for facilitating learning across the curriculum.

I began with two questions: "What can we do to help these kids who are not writing easily?" and "What would happen if we got materials into every child's hands to encourage writing and met with families regularly to explain our thinking?" I did not realize they would change so many aspects of my teaching and learning at school. Over the next eight years, children's writing became central to my teaching. As it did, children's ideas, questions, and conversations became integral to the teaching of the school district curriculum. I, too, changed as a teacher and as a writer as I connected my own experiences with those of my children. This dissertation documents the process of change in my classroom as an innovation that was originally intended to promote home-school connections became a catalyst for new approaches to first and second grade classroom teaching and learning.

Purpose of the Study

The results of the Writing Boxes going home for the first year began a transformation in my teaching and in my thinking about how children learn in school and at home. It was as if a stone had been tossed into the middle of a pond—the ripples caused by the initial impact of the rock striking the water flowed outward, eventually touching all sides of the shoreline. Writing Boxes set in motion currents of new ideas and activities that touched every aspect of my classroom teaching and my own work as an educator. The result has been fundamentally different approaches to the teaching of writing and language arts for six, seven and eight year-old children.

In this dissertation I will describe how new activities for organizing learning using writing became incorporated into my curriculum throughout the Writing Box project. These changes occurred gradually, evolving from one year to the next as I observed what kids liked to do and what taught them the greatest amount of information. Most were largely unplanned, resulting from children's writing at home with their Writing Box materials. I followed the lead of the children, adding to or modifying my academic curriculum and classroom routines to include children's interests in writing letters, news, stories, poetry, and nonfiction accounts of their discoveries in science and mathematics.

Each innovation sparked additional new practices in the following years. Most new developments involved several aspects of the classroom at the same time, changing how the children interacted with one another and with me. The process of change redefined and revised how I viewed children as writers and learners. For purposes of this discussion, I will group the changes in curriculum and instruction into six broad categories, as follows:

a) *Personal and Public Communications*: Children compose their own letters or cards to friends and acquaintances while also writing notes, lists, signs, daily messages, and other types of public announcements.

b) *"The Before Noon News"*: Children write and share personal news along with national events, the weather, the daily lunch menu, and other information gleaned from the daily newspaper during a whole class meeting just before lunch.

c) *Poetry*: Young writers play with language to discover ways to use their imagination in writing and to express their ideas using a variety of poetic forms, including acrostics, concrete, two-voice, and haiku poems.

d) *Stories*: Young children use fiction and nonfiction writing to experience different genres, to try out different uses of language, and to experience the power of personal narratives.

e) *"I Wonder" Journals*: Youngsters connect writing with personally relevant questions, hands-on projects and child-conducted experiments in science and mathematics.

e) *Technology*: Children use tape recorders, hand-held electronic spellers, E-Mail and electronic bulletin boards, and computers with open-ended software in their writing.

The study includes the following key provisions:

a) each child in my classroom during the eight years of the project received writing materials to keep at home in an originally packaged format called the Writing Box;

b) families of the children in the classroom were furnished with current information about children and writing by attending two evening meetings at school in order to discuss children's writing development with the classroom teacher, or through reading the "Writing Box Home Writing Guide" or the book, *Kids Have All the Write Stuff*;

c) samples of writing done by children at home and in school were copied and saved each year to provide an ongoing record of what children wrote during the Writing Box project; and

d) all children were encouraged by their teacher and some children by their families to write at home and in school.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses issues important to parents, family members, teachers and others interested in young children's learning.

First, it documents a process of teacher-initiated classroom innovation. In recent years, educational innovators have developed methods that make learning meaningful and successful for all children, not just those for whom standardized tests have predicted success. Some notable examples include:

a) school psychologist and reading specialist Marie Clay (1985), whose work with elementary school age children in New Zealand delayed in reading development created the teaching methodology known as Reading Recovery, which is in use in some schools in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia;

b) high school teacher Jaime Escalante, whose successful teaching of Advanced Placement (A.P.) physics to classes of low-tracked students in inner-city Los Angeles resulted in many of them passing the national Advanced Placement physics test in increasing numbers each year;

c) physician and educator James Comer (1980), whose restructuring of schools to include families and communities in decision making for students has improved the learning success of students in low achieving inner-city schools. These innovators have reformed learning environments, teaching methodologies, and adult expectations, enabling children to learn to their potential.

Second, a classroom teacher and families worked together to become effective promoters of and partners with young children's writing. Most adults do not realize that young children have the skills to write from a very young age. Lines, squiggles, and letters that lack conventional form are not recognized as writing, so adults rarely ask for or engage in writing with children until conventional forms appear in their communications. In homes that were part of the Writing Box project, and some that were not, parents and children explored new ways of interacting with one another different from watching television, discussing daily events, or even reading together. Although children are

naturally interested in writing and telling stories, these activities are more likely to be encouraged and utilized for children's creative expression when adult support and interest is obvious. Children in this study discovered that they could express their thoughts and influence their environment through written communications because of adult interest at school and at home.

Third, the study builds on the impact of children having their own personal writing materials stored in a Writing Box. The utensils included in the Writing Box are inexpensive and found in many homes but it is important to the child to have them all in one place for ready use. Parents can easily customize Writing Boxes to the age and interest of their children and to the socioeconomic structure of the family. For example, a three- or four-year-old might receive a pad of paper, pencils and crayons in a Writing Box, while an older child might have other materials, such as scissors, ruler, magic markers, and tape or glue. The Writing Box serves as a catalyst for writing in that it promotes opportunities for fun-filled self-expression through written communication.

Fourth, it shows how a teacher changes understandings and practices as a result of doing research in the classroom. As I have adopted the belief that all children are successful learners before entering school, my teaching practices have evolved their focus toward demonstrating children's intellectual prowess and creativity through writing and its links to successful learning of the classroom curriculum. Hands-on experiential learning activities that invite children's curiosity and desire to know have replaced workbooks, ditto sheets, and whole-class teaching processes that expect children to spend most of their time learning "right" answers.

Emphasis is put on activities that elicit children's unique ideas about the world and that showcase what children already know so they can be identified as experts at many things. Individualized assessments of children show what has

been learned and what the child is ready to do next, in addition to norm referenced tests which guarantee only that some students will be labeled as successes while others will be judged as deficient. Children learn most curriculum together instead of being separated into like-knowledge or ability groups. These new conditions in my classroom might be characterized as “finding ways to fit education to every child.”

Limitations of the Study

The data base for this study is limited to one classroom of five, six, seven, and eight-year-old children in a public elementary laboratory school in a suburban Massachusetts community between the 1988-89 to 1995-96 academic years. Although the student and family population reflects the multicultural nature of the community, distinguishing characteristics of socioeconomic background, race or gender were not used in the selection of children or families for the study. The study is further limited by my own participation as the teacher in the classroom that is the basis for the study. As such, my perspective is central to the study, and is in no way comprehensive in its outlook. At the same time, since I was the teacher in charge of the classroom during the period of the Writing Box project, my perspective offers other teachers, school administrators, and university researchers the opportunity to look at processes of educational change in classroom teaching and curriculum reform from a teacher's point of view.

Definition of Terms

This dissertation uses terms associated with whole language teaching, process writing, and young children's literacy development as well as the

literature on educational change. Those that may be unfamiliar or confusing are defined below:

Young Children's Writing

“Young children write everywhere—in family living areas and kitchens with parents, siblings and friends; in their rooms amidst toys, stuffed animals, and clothes; on a computer or on a typewriter; in restaurants and offices as they wait for adults; in cars and buses traveling down the highway; and in schools” (Edwards & Maloy, 1992, p. 3). Writing is a way for them to express their ideas and to make sense of the world around them. They use environmental print and interactions with other children and adults, the media, and their own imaginations as sources of writing ideas.

Five-, six-, seven-, and eight-year-old children write to communicate information in their pretend play. For example, they write signs and notes; draw pictures or symbols, scribbles or words for labels; and create purposeful symbols intrinsic to their play such as ticket issuing by a police person, order taking or menu writing by a restaurant person, clue devising for a scavenger hunt, or program making for plays and performances. Young children also write to explore wordplay and imagination through stories, poetry, biographies, reports, letters and other genres of written language as part of home experiences and school curriculum.

Other activities that influence their writing include telling stories orally; dictating text for someone to write; discussing writing and illustrating; creating text for wordless books; reading or performing plays; using manipulative language materials to construct text such as rebus puzzles, sentence strips, picture and word cards; hearing stories read aloud.

Process Writing

Process writing (or writing process) defines a way of learning about writing. Writing process teachers believe that people of all ages learn to write by writing, sharing their writing, receiving suggestions from others, rewriting, editing, and publishing. They believe that students learn writing conventions most easily and fully by using them in real writing situations rather than by practicing bits and pieces of handwriting, capitalization, full sentence structure, or punctuation through activities in workbooks or on skills dittoes.

Children write on a regular basis, often daily, in ways that are comfortable for each individually about their own topics and ideas. A five-, six- or seven-year-old child's writing might be in invented spelling using phonetic associations, strings of random letters, or curly lines that look like adult cursive writing. Some children leave spaces between words while others put dots or lines between words or draw circles around each word. Children add punctuation as they learn about it or as they see it and begin to copy it.

Correct spelling, letter formation and use of punctuation are not the immediate goals or initial concerns of a process writing program with five-, six- or seven-year-olds. The goals are for children to understand why people write, to write for themselves, to develop their skills to convey meaning, and to use their own writing as an authentic and interesting reason to learn more about the conventions of written language.

Process writing is part of everyday situations, a central part of the curriculum. Teachers and students correspond through notes, letters, signs and messages to each other. Journals, nonfiction narratives, fiction stories, science and math books, poems, songs, plays, and newspapers are some of the forms of writing being done by children and adults. Adult and child created print is in plain view in the classroom at all times—in the daily message, the recording of the

day and date, poetry and song charts, whole class and individually made books, journals and signs.

The teacher and students conference about their writing and seek ideas and suggestions for improving it. Children conference with each other in small groups or in pairs. The classroom environment accepts, supports and stimulates children's risk taking by valuing each learner's knowledge and building on it for further learning and teaching. As a student writes, sees writing demonstrated, and conferences about writing with teacher and peers, standard conventions of print are taught and incorporated into children's writing.

Encouraging the use of invented spelling writing facilitates students' concentration on communicating meaning rather than on first learning correct conventions. In this way, youngsters' feelings of being writers are reinforced and writing is neither dependent on learning conventions of print first or confined to using only words a child knows how to spell conventionally. A child's knowledge of writing conventions is not used as an assessment of writing ability or potential for success, but as a guide for the teacher about what information to introduce next to the child.

Invented Spelling

Invented spelling is a child's way of writing words. Each child constructs her or his own invented spellings. Sometimes a child uses letters that accurately correspond to sounds in a word; sometimes a string of letters with no phonetic connection to the words; sometimes symbols, circles and lines. Young children do not know spelling rules or how to spell every word in standard form. Scribbling, inventing symbols, or inventing spelling allows them to write their meanings and ideas from the youngest ages without being blocked by fear of not "doing it right." Adults who support invented spelling establish a norm that

however a child writes is right. From this beginning, children's understanding and knowledge grows in ways that facilitate learning the culture's conventions of print.

According to researcher Susan Sowers (1986, pp. 62, 65-66), "invented spelling is the name for children's misspellings before they know the rules adults use to spell, often before they know how to read. In some respects inventive spellers are learning to write as they learned to talk." Over time, through inventions, and with more experiences, children incorporate conventional spelling into their writing with their invented spelling. Encouraging children to write invented spelling does not preclude learning about conventional spelling. As Sowers cautioned, "If we want our children to spell well, we will have to attend to spelling. This does not mean a return to weekly lists of twenty spelling words with a test each Friday. It does mean more systematic attention to spelling and proofreading responsibilities on the child's part."

Nongraded Schools

A system of school organization that groups children according to mixed age groups rather than grade levels by age. In a nongraded school, for example, a classroom is more appropriately described as a group of six, seven and eight year-old children than a combined first and second grade class.

Combined Grade Classrooms

A form of school organization in which one or more grade levels are combined in a single classroom as in a combination first and second grade classroom.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I present an overview of the research literature on young children's literacy and writing development before entering school and during the early elementary school grades that I used to guide the planning and implementation of the Writing Box project. My objective is to establish a theoretical basis for how young children learn about language and to explore the role that educators play in the development of children's writing. I will highlight the research of educators who are proponents of whole language teaching and advocates of process writing. I will contrast well known, or traditional, methods of teaching writing in schools with less known, or newer, models that encourage children to write in unconventional ways. Finally, I identify features of schools that impede change toward more successful methodologies and describe how teacher-initiated research provides new ideas for improving teaching.

Children's Literacy Learning

Psychologists and educators know of children's almost limitless capacities for learning and accomplishment when supported by inspired, loving adults. As the late educator and philosopher John Holt (1989, pp. 152, 162) eloquently noted:

Children are passionately eager to make as much sense as they can of the world around them, are extremely good at it, and do it as scientists do, by *creating* knowledge out of experience. Children observe, wonder, find, or make and then test the answers to the questions they ask

themselves. When they are not actually *prevented* from doing these things, they continue to do them and to get better and better at it.

Holt assured adults of their important role in promoting children's learning, "not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions—if they have any—and helping them explore the things they are most interested in."

Children are natural learners, as psychologist Benjamin S. Bloom (1985, p. 4), has shown throughout more than 40 years of research. He concludes that "what any person in the world can learn, almost all other persons can learn if provided with appropriate prior and current conditions of learning." According to Bloom, "the middle 95% of school students become very similar in terms of their measured achievement, learning ability, rate of learning, and motivation for further learning when provided with *favorable learning conditions*."

In the early 1980s, Bloom (1985, p. 3) and his associates at the University of Chicago's Development of Talent Research Project extended their findings about school learning to other endeavors. They examined

the processes by which individuals who have reached the highest levels of accomplishment in selected fields have been helped to develop their capabilities so fully. The subjects of our study included concert pianists, sculptors, research mathematicians, research neurologists, Olympic swimmers, and tennis champions.

They concluded exceptional achievements did not occur because of a person's "special gifts and innate aptitudes." The successes of exceptional learners began with strong parental support while they were very young and resulted from "a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education, and training."

Generally, it has been assumed that young children who read and write at an early age possess innate talents or are more gifted intellectually than those who do not accomplish as much. Developmental psychologist Howard Gardner (1983, pp. 8-9, 78-79, 77), in his studies for the Harvard University Project on Human Potential, has rejected the idea of intelligence as a singular entity in favor of the view that there are “several *relatively autonomous* human intellectual competencies” or “frames of mind.” He concluded that intelligences “can be fashioned and combined in a multiplicity of adaptive ways by individuals and cultures.” It is “linguistic intelligence. . . that seems to be most widely and democratically shared across the human species.” Poets show “a sensitivity to the sounds, rhythms, inflections, and meters of words. . . a sensitivity to the different functions of language—its potential to excite, convince, stimulate, convey information, or simply to please.”

Nor can intelligence be conveniently predicted or measured by IQ or achievement tests. Contrary to prevailing ideas about individual abilities, all children have the potential to acquire the basic competencies of reading, writing and mathematics. Some take longer to grasp certain concepts and most learn more from hands-on approaches than rote memory tasks. A person’s intelligence, noted Yale University psychologist Robert J. Sternberg (1988, p. x, 65), “can be understood as mental self-management—the manner in which we order and make sense of the events that take place around us and within us.” IQ tests do not accurately predict a child’s likely strengths or areas of future success because they “measure only a narrow spectrum of our mental self-management skills.”

Literacy Learning Before Entering School

Building on a view of children as curious, self-directed, and inventive learners, researchers have made a series of observations about how literacy is

learned from the earliest ages. First, to the great surprise of many adults, young children come to school with important knowledge about the function and conventions of writing. How did they acquire their understandings? Through observing the literate society around them and people engaged in reading and writing. As Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky (1982) concluded from their interviews of three through six-year-olds in Buenos Aires, Argentina, preschoolers know about conventions of written language and can write for themselves in unconventional forms.

Young children learn about conventions of print as part of their everyday activities before they are formally taught in school (Goodman, 1986; Clay, 1987). They identify products and places by recognizing pictures and symbols. They know what the Golden Arches signify—they read the symbol as McDonald's. Similarly, they read and recognize the "No Smoking" symbols displayed in public places and the colors on a traffic light as meaning "Stop" or "Go." From seeing print all around them, watching people read and write, hearing conversations about language, asking what words say and repeating the answer, children's knowledge accrues, enabling them to construct their own texts to convey meaning through lines, circles, squiggles, scribbles, letters, or invented spellings.

Second, researchers have challenged the assumption of many educators that only children of middle and high socioeconomic status, who have heard stories and had opportunities to interact with books, paper, and writing tools, have developed literacy knowledge before they enter school. Following this line of thinking, they contend that a high percentage of low-income and minority children are not ready for school because they lack necessary experiences with language. By contrast, a significant body of research is united in its conclusions that socioeconomic status alone is not the sole mediator of literacy development (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Fraatz, 1987; Teale, 1986; Wells, 1986; Tizard &

Hughes, 1984; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; Schickedanz & Sullivan, 1984; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982).

William Teale (1986, p. 194) reported on his study of literacy activities in families of low socio-economic status: "The home literacy environment is influenced by more than social structural factors. The extent to which literacy mediated a particular domain of activity for a particular family and the distribution for each family of reading and writing across the different domains was also affected significantly by cultural practices. . . culture as well as social structural factors influenced how, to what ends, by whom, and when literacy was used."

Teale (1986, pp. 192-193) argued that children from all socioeconomic groups have had an array of experiences with written language prior to entering school.

Furthermore, we can see that these children experienced literacy primarily as a social process during their preschool years. . . . it was generally the case that reading or writing occurred as aspects of activities which enabled family members to organize their lives. . . . Some low-income children have considerable contact with literacy and are well on their way to become competent readers and writers by the time they get to school. . . .in order to understand why there is considerable literacy activity in some homes and little in others and why the functions and uses of literacy vary across families, we must "unpackage" terms such as SES and ethnicity and keep at the forefront of our considerations that literacy is a social process and a cultural practice. . . .Home background plays a significant role in a young child's orientation to literacy. But home background is a complex of economic, social, cultural and even personal factors.

Teale (1986, p. 201) corroborated the findings of others about the importance of writing in the home interactions observed in a study of low-income families. He stated: "Finally there is one additional aspect of preschool literacy experience which deserves much greater attention: writing. We observed considerable writing in the homes of the 24 children in the San Diego study. In fact, of the total literacy that took place during the 1,300-plus hours of observation, almost half of it was writing."

Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines (1988, pp. 200, 6) conducted a six year study with low-income families living in inner-city settings. They found families who "*are active members in a print community in which literacy is used for a wide variety of social, technical, and aesthetic purposes, for a wide variety of audiences and in a wide variety of situations.*" Children, in particular, were "*active participants and interpreters in a social world in which texts are written and read.*" Children were supported by their families in their literacy learning, helped with homework, and urged to do well in school. The authors described a young mother's interactions with her six-year-old daughter about learning words when they go on to describe her conversation about her daughter's writing: "Tanya also talked about Queenie and writing, and she told us how difficult it was for her to keep paper away from her. She complained that every time she tried to write a letter Queenie had written on all the pages of her writing pad."

Third, researchers have shown how literacy information is acquired through interactions with parents and others in children's lives. Everyday family relationships offer more in-depth conversations, encounters with print, and examples of literacy use than do interactions with adults in most nursery, preschool or elementary schools. In the families observed by the researchers cited above, children, regardless of socioeconomic status, acquired literacy knowledge

which prepared them to enter school with an understanding of print, its uses, and ways to produce it themselves. The individual time spent with adults in schools was so short and the conversations so abbreviated that exploring topics in detail did not occur regularly.

Two different researchers in the United States, both mothers watching the growth and development of their young sons, found that early explorations of writing and reading mutually support knowledge acquisition of both. Glenda Bissex (1980, p. 189) highlighted the dual impact of reading and writing on the literacy development of her son, and commented that “although invented spelling developed rapidly at the start, writing and reading developed together, with the lead taken sometimes by one and sometimes by the other.”

In *Adam's Writing Revolutions: One Child's Literacy Development from Infancy Through Grade One*, Judith Schickedanz (1990, pp. xiii, 120) described her son's developing understanding of “how words are made. The story begins with his first scribbles and continues to the point where he began to appreciate the complexity of our spelling system.” His writing samples illustrate his evolving theories about and knowledge of spelling from age two to seven. Writing inspired his interest initially. Reading produced conflicting information about spelling that informed his theories. The interplay of his writing and reading created his questions about spelling and helped him acquire the information that he wanted. Through this process, she concluded that “Adam . . . created his own knowledge. He did not passively take in knowledge in the form that was presented to him.”

In their study of schoolchildren in Great Britain, Tizard and Hughes (1984) and Wells (1986) found that the low socio-economic status of the families they observed did not hinder oral language development of the children. In fact, both studies found in their research that the homes of the pre-schoolers provided

conversations between adults and young children that were more in-depth and complex than those in pre-school with the adult staff. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) in their study of pre-school children in Buenos Aires, found that children of low socio-economic backgrounds had similar knowledge of print as middle class children until the beginning of school. Then the experiences of being read to and having more encounters with print put middle class children in the favorable position of learning the way the schools were teaching beginning literacy.

Researchers of young children's learning agree that the majority of adults are unaware of how much understanding of language children possess before they are formally taught the rules and conventions of writing and reading in school. Children's literacy experiences differ widely. Young children enter school already possessing understandings about the function and conventions of written language that surprise their teachers and their families. Some have been read to, played games with letters or words and memorized favorite books that they recite as if they are reading rather than remembering the words. Some have dictated stories to adults and have written for themselves. Some have had few experiences hearing or telling stories and fewer opportunities to experiment with writing, but still they know that letters and words convey meaning.

Young Children's Writing Development

Young children display their writing development and potentials through oral language play, drawing and writing. Children's rhymes, riddles, jokes, chants, nicknames, slang words, and songs are distinctive forms of language play used primarily within peer groups, as anthropologists Iona and Peter Opie (1959, p. 1) found in Great Britain during the 1950s. Five thousand children from all sorts of backgrounds and communities—rural and urban, low-income and affluent—contributed to the Opies' collection of school and playground language that

“circulates from child to child, usually outside the home, and beyond the influence of the family circle.” These “verses are not intended for adult ears. In fact part of their fun is the thought, usually correct, that adults know nothing about them.” In *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, the Opies concluded that rhymes, jokes, songs, and other language play are an integral part of children’s “culture.” They found versions of rhymes popular today that were sung by children 150 to 200 years ago, and have been passed orally from generation to generation.

Drawing, an activity that most children feel they can do without help, invites written and oral communication. “The drawings of young schoolchildren are often their most striking creations: vibrant, expressive, exhibiting a strong command of form and considerable beauty,” noted Howard Gardner (1980, pp. 5-6, 11). In *Artful Scribbles*, he described how children move through stages of artistic development marked by new issues and discoveries. Infants begin artistic expression when they make marks on paper. Three and four-year-olds develop “a vocabulary of lines and forms” that culminates when they first create “a recognizable depiction of *some thing* in the world. . . .” Youngsters continue to produce compelling artistic expressions into their early school years where their free-flowing creativity is replaced by play, social relationships, and the desire to create more adult-like drawings.

Gardner (1980, p. 15) pointed out that even preschoolers can be considered artists because they think about and use certain key dimensions of artistic expression. When a youngster shows

that he knows how to vary the use of line, that he attends to such aspects as color, expressiveness, and shading, that he intends to produce a certain effect, and that he (and others) are gaining pleasure from the

results of his activity, then we might properly view that child as a young artist.

Graphic representation in drawing, painting and picture-making enable children to express themselves artistically as well as orally. Art integrally connects with youngsters' story creations. Comics, maps, graphs and charts depict meaning through illustrations.

“Children can write sooner than we ever dreamed was possible,” remarked Lucy Calkins (1983, p. 47), a researcher of children's writing for more than a decade. Children as young as age two have the capability to write. They write through explorations of marks on paper. Sometimes a young child writes to enjoy pretending to write; other times to convey a message. Even if the lines and figures that preschoolers make on paper do not resemble words, they are often intended to mean something. Scribbling is a legitimate and important form of written communication for a young child. Looking for correct writing, adults “fail to note the onset of literacy and, in so doing, also fail to appreciate the real literacy achievement made by 3-year-olds” (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984, p. 18).

In *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons*, researchers Jerome Harste, Virginia Woodward and Carolyn Burke (1984) reported on their multi-year study of children's writing in three different preschool settings. A paragraph from their 1981 report to the National Institute of Education entitled “Children, Their Language and World: The Pragmatics of Written Language Use and Learning,” quoted in the introduction to their book, summarizes their assumptions about young children's knowledge of symbols and text at the outset of the study:

We began our study of what 3, 4, 5, and 6-year old children know about written language with a good deal of optimism, assured that they know much more about print than what teachers and beginning reading

and writing programs assume. In part this optimism was founded in a body of research which preceded our current work. . . . In part it was founded on our own work. . . . and the work of doctoral students with whom we have had the good fortune to work. . . . What the results of our effort have taught us is that we began not being optimistic enough; that children know much more than we or past researchers have ever dared to assume, and that many of the premises and assumptions with which we began must give way to more generous perspective if research and understanding are to proceed.

The authors employ a point-counterpoint strategy throughout their book to illustrate their findings about what children know about literacy. First they observe children's writing and listen to the accompanying conversations while the writing is occurring. They then describe the knowledge a child is demonstrating through analysis of the writing and the conversation. They call for a new strategy for teaching young children, based on what youngsters know rather than on what adults can recognize. Adults assume literacy means "to represent the world on their (adult) terms, with their templates. . . . the young child is a written language user long before his writing looks representational" (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984, p. 18).

Young children's communications do not have to resemble conventional text to be meaningful writing. I recall a memory of a crying four year old standing beside me in an aisle at his favorite bargain store. "What's the matter, Kyle?" I asked in consternation, "We have everything we need."

The wailing reply was accompanied by his fist waving a piece of paper containing a series of squiggly lines above his head, "I have rocket truck on my list," he sobbed. Then I realized that the rocket truck was not in the shopping cart with the other items because I did not know he had written it on his list. As

Harste and his colleagues stated: “The assumption of intention and the access to literacy it represents govern any written language user’s very first markings as well as his or her present ones. . . . Unconventionality does not deny intentionality” (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984, p. 191).

When assured that what they are doing is valued and supported by adults, virtually all young children will draw or write scribbles, squiggles, letters, or words, and approximate different writing genres to express their ideas in print. While doing research for *Kids Have All the Write Stuff* (Edwards & Maloy, 1992), I have observed young children between the ages of two and eight engaging in the following activities that are normally associated with much older writers:

- Composing their own stories;
- Understanding differences between fiction and nonfiction;
- Creating characters and plot;
- Reading their marks on paper as text;
- Working on stories and drawings for sustained periods of time;
- Writing multiple drafts of their compositions;
- Utilizing punctuation, standard spelling, and invented spelling;
- Switching roles from writer to reader;
- Experimenting with many different genres—poetry, fiction, nonfiction, letters, songs, comics, and newspapers.

Young children will produce text when encouraged by adults. Their ideas emerge as they converse, draw, talk about their drawings, and write symbols and letters. They want to try to write and will often do so on their own in their pretend play. They also want adults to read and understand what they have written. Children have the desire and ability to communicate written expression

for their own purposes long before they are taught the conventions of handwriting, spelling, and punctuation.

Young children enjoy creating characters and stories; recording realities and fantasies on paper; and communicating their ideas to others through written language. Researchers now know that young children develop understandings of writing and reading in the course of their day-to-day interactions with other people—parents, teachers and older children—and through television, media, and the public print they see around them. A child’s early explorations of writing are more likely to be enjoyed and continued when adults thoughtfully and sensitively support these efforts at written self-expression. Over time, as children and adults engage in writing together, new family relationships emerge—children think of themselves as writers while parents, teachers and caregivers become the coaches of their written communication.

Learning in School

Traditional school curriculum and teaching methods do not reflect how children acquire literacy knowledge from homes, peers, media, and other environmental sources. Even though children’s invented spelling writing demonstrates conceptual understandings of skills that schools want to develop, importance is not attached to how children originally learned this information. Educators, largely ignorant about preschoolers’ knowledge of reading and writing and unconcerned about duplicating the conditions in the school setting that taught children what they know, emphasize what adults assume will develop literacy—handwriting, letter sounds, spelling and reading—without reflection about whether or not their assumptions are reliable or useful to learning. As Donald Graves (1983, p. 4) noted ironically: “Children aren’t supposed to be able to write unless they can read, This statement makes the rounds in too many

texts and meetings without finding out what children really can do. Maria Montessori wrote about the writing of four- and five-year-olds way back at the turn of the century.”

I saw an example of the sharp discontinuity between outside of school and school-based learning shortly after beginning to write *Kids Have All the Write Stuff*. I spent a morning with my nephew Kyle in his half-day kindergarten classroom. The children in this class clearly loved going to school. Anticipation and joy were evident on each of their faces as they moved about the room. The teacher encouraged the children to enjoy pursuing their own interests, whether building with blocks, using materials in the art center, writing books, or working at the computer. She read to the children everyday. They wrote stories in invented spelling and shared them in front of the class. There were no dittoed practice sheets or workbooks that made each child’s effort look exactly the same as everyone else’s.

Teaching methods emphasized the active and cooperative learning of language arts, math and science concepts, using materials that children could touch, move, and use for play. At one point in the morning, I observed the children working in pairs measuring how many small cubes were needed to balance walnuts on a scale. When Kyle and I left at noon to visit his sister’s fifth grade classroom, he inquired, “Why don’t we learn like they do at Emily’s school? She does papers and learns time and mathematics. Why don’t we do that?”

After just a few months in kindergarten, Kyle was aware of the dichotomy between his active learning that looked to him like play and what he saw his sister doing that appeared to be the work of “real” school. He saw Emily completing homework assignments and listened to her conversations with their mother about what she was doing in class. Emily was increasingly concerned

with correct performance, neat work handed in on time, and getting good grades. She sometimes complained about the difficulty and remoteness of the things she was learning. Slowly vanishing for Emily—but not yet for Kyle—was the sense that learning was easy and natural, and that important ideas can be explored by weighing walnuts on a scale and writing stories in one's own spelling.

A great many kindergartens and elementary school classrooms throughout the country are more like Emily's than Kyle's. Play, fun and active learning based on the interests of the children is not the method of teaching. Teachers, supervisors and other adults determine how the day will be spent, what topics will be discussed, when different "subjects" will be taught, and what consequences will ensue when a youngster does not follow the prescribed routine.

In these schools, children experience a sharp break from their accustomed routines of learning employed in their home and outside-of-school environments—a routine that often begins with listening and develops into activity. This pattern is used for a wide diversity of learning—reading, hitting a ball, riding a tricycle, doing a cartwheel, drawing, playing with clay or paint, or writing. In many families children are encouraged to pursue child-set goals, take risks, express ideas, and learn new behaviors by making mistakes and acquiring proficiency through practice. Activity and manipulation of materials is the method of teaching. Parents and other adults work with children throughout the early years, supporting and nurturing their development by praising their efforts and answering their questions, helping them develop their curiosity and enjoyment of learning.

Once young children enter school, the process of learning and the role of adults in that learning changes dramatically. Children can no longer continue to be playful learners who decide what interests to explore and for how long; they

are now “students” who must follow a standard curriculum devised by adults. The student is taught by an adult whose goal is not to pursue new discoveries outside the curriculum, but to teach the approved academic content.

In schools, children encounter new expectations of their time and efforts and new demands on their attention. They learn, claimed Philip Jackson in *Life in Classrooms* (1968, pp. 8, 9), not only the official curriculum of reading, writing and arithmetic, but a subtle “hidden” curriculum of “rules, regulations and routines.” There is a remarkable sameness for most children to the 7,000 hours they spend in elementary schools: “Each student has an assigned seat, and under normal circumstances, that is where he is to be found.” Instruction follows well-established rules—“no loud talking during seatwork, do not interrupt someone else during discussion, keep your eyes on your own paper during tests, raise your hand if you have a question.”

Classrooms that emphasize order and control over activity and excitement contrast sharply with the learning experiences children find in families, neighborhoods, and peer groups. Often what is expected in the classroom learning environment is paying attention to the teacher and getting the right answer. After being criticized for misspellings or odd word choices, students do not then want to risk making mistakes again, and revert to playing it safe by using only short words in simple, declarative sentences. This inhibition about making mistakes and taking risks affects children’s confidence and their thinking about what they can do. Self-esteem is promoted or devalued by the responses of teachers, peers and other school adults. Youngsters who have the right answers are rewarded with praise and support. Those who do not may act out against the structure and become labeled “troublemakers” or “developmentally delayed.” For them, school is often an unfriendly and unsupportive place. They see little

reason to try to succeed, for their efforts are usually regarded as insufficient or unacceptable.

Traditional Approaches to the Teaching of Writing

Glaring disparities exist between the natural learning processes of children and the organizational approaches of schools toward the teaching of writing. “Beginning in the first grade, sometimes in kindergarten,” observed Donald Graves and Virginia Stuart in their book *Write From the Start* (1985, p. 10) “children are blitzed with hundreds of mimeographed “skills” worksheets designed to prepare them to read and write.” They are expected to commit to memory particular skills—the sounds of letters, punctuation, capitalization, complete sentence formation—that are supposed to eventually lead to writing and reading. To memorize all of these skills and be tested on their proficiency, children “practice, hundreds of times, breaking down words into discrete visual and aural units: beginnings and ends with vowels and blends, among others. When faced with actual sentences, they are taught to attack the words in similar fashion, breaking them down into individual letters and groups of letters.”

Writing instruction proceeds from the belief that children must master handwriting, letter sounds, conventional spelling, punctuation, and complete sentences before they can be considered writers. As Graves and Stuart (1985, p. 10) noted: “In writing, the *components* consist of letters, words, punctuation marks, and parts of speech. First-graders practice forming individual letters, copying or tracing models provided. Soon they graduate to words, which are also copied and traced at the start. When they are actually allowed to construct sentences, they are usually given a list of words to use, as if a sentence could be put together from a kit.” As they proceed through the skills, they practice punctuating model sentences and then diagramming them as a way to identify the

parts of speech. Rote memorization and drills from worksheets that have no clear purpose important to the child, but which are graded and often must be corrected by the student, at best produce only boredom. At worst they produce chronic disengagement from learning and youngsters' misbelief that writing is too difficult for them to learn; that they are incapable of meeting the challenge.

The gloomy picture offered by Graves and Stuart prevails in many elementary classrooms. Kindergartners practice penmanship and write or circle answers on work papers to practice counting, matching upper with lower case letters, forming numbers and shapes, and reading words that identify colors. Students are usually grouped for instruction by the information that they know, making it easier for adults to choose work papers that advance children's practice to what they will learn next. Yet, as Jeannie Oakes (1985, p. 7) concluded after examining ability grouping and tracking in schools, "no group of students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group." Once labeled a slow learner or an underachiever, a child has difficulty overcoming an institutional assumption that she or he is not as capable of learning as are other youngsters.

First through fourth graders are expected to master a series of related skills that are often presented and taught individually, as if they did not overlap and fit together in some way—spelling, handwriting, punctuation, capitalization, sentence formation, paragraphing. Students spend considerable time in class doing worksheets or seat work to practice the sounds of letters, spelling of words, and formation of complete sentences. Teachers and schools using this component skills method assume that young children can best develop fluent writing skills by first learning each print convention individually. Adults believe that eventually children will put the pieces of these component skills together to communicate easily in writing.

Teaching phonics or sight words using a basal reading series or a particular program supports a component skill model of learning. A phonics-first movement dominates discussions about how to teach children to read and write. Phonics is the systematic learning of letter sounds. The alphabet has only 26 letters, but many more sounds than letters. For half a century, memorizing sight words has been the major opposing method to phonics for teaching reading.

One of many systems of phonics instruction, intended to be taught to first graders before any reading or writing instruction occurs, teaches 45 sounds and the 70 phonograms needed to write them. The students learn only 54 of the 70 phonograms before beginning spelling instruction. It is suggested in the teacher's guide that the normal routine for teaching children all 70 phonograms is to spend three hours a day for fifteen consecutive days of school. Teachers introduce four new phonograms daily and schedule extra help for children who are not memorizing these as easily as the quickest members of the class. As children learn the phoneme sounds, this program says, they will put them together to be able to read words fluently. Reading instruction is then unnecessary because the knowledge of the phonemes assures that the children will be able to sound out almost any word they encounter. At that point children can practice the phonemes they have memorized by reading books with a teacher. Memorization and practice assure their rapid success as independent readers.

After memorizing the first 54 phonemes children begin learning the 29 spelling rules. Spelling Rule Seven shows the five different kinds of silent final e's, illustrated with examples of five different kinds of words ending in e. These words are written in columns under each of the examples of a silent e in each child's spelling notebook. As the spelling rules are introduced, words illustrating the rules are learned by the students.

Another phonetic basal reading system builds children's reading vocabularies by teaching short phonetic patterns: "Pat sat on a mat" or "a cat sat in a hat." The words in the text teach a certain pattern. After pages of practice with that pattern, other patterns, "Dan can fan the man," are introduced.

There are more than 28 books in that phonetic series proceeding from short vowel patterns through long vowel patterns, making it similar in teaching design to the first phonetic system described, but different in that reading practice is contained within the series of books. Children read through them at their own pace, which is what makes them individualized, rather than everyone learning the same thing at the same time. Spelling is coordinated with the phonetic pattern that the child is currently learning, so spelling is individualized also.

Sight word systems concentrate on teaching vocabulary through repetition—based on the theory that when selected words repeat regularly in the text of the stories, the children will learn them by their repeated presence. For instance, the words frog, big, little, green, and water may be sent home with the child as flashcards because these words will be the next ones taught in the text. Then, in both basal reader and accompanying workbook, these words will appear many times.

In the usual manner of teaching writing to young students, reading and writing are not connected except to answer questions in work books or to practice writing spelling words. Writing instruction focuses on handwriting, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, complete sentence formation, and vocabulary. A second grade student might be asked to complete the following homework assignment: Identify all the mistakes in capitalization, punctuation, sentence structure, and spelling in these ten sentences. The teacher corrects the child's answers and enters the grade into a progress log for each student.

Because these are individual work assignments, such activities isolate children from one another. Because grades may be given, such assignments foster competition rather than cooperation. Because correct responses are emphasized, such assignments inhibit risk-taking. Teaching writing in this manner rarely taps the natural enthusiasm children have for writing their own topics in their own way.

In summary, writing as it is currently taught in the majority of classrooms in the United States proceeds from the belief that children must learn the skills of handwriting, sounds of letters, conventional spelling, punctuation, and the use of complete sentences before they can write. Often children are taught in homogeneous groups to help the teacher match knowledge and skill development to achievement test scores. When writing is thought of as a process of constructing meaning through text, a different set of assumptions informs the methodology for teaching and working with students. Each child's writing is used to encourage further writing and to help that child develop more knowledge of standard conventions. As the child writes, handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction are learned contextually through seeing standard conventions in the teacher's writing, in books, and through discussions about writing.

Whole Language Approaches to Learning

As a philosophy, whole language is "an attitude, a set of beliefs about how children learn" (Barron, 1990, p. 9). It assumes every child is able to learn and wants to do so successfully. Whole language values the learning children have accomplished within the context of their experiences and with the help of their families before and after they enter school. In a whole language view, "it is not just oral language that counts as language" (Edelsky, Altwerger & Flores, 1991,

pp. 9-10). Gestures, sounds, words, and print all communicate meanings and thus play central parts in stimulating a child's learning from birth. Through different forms of language, "we can talk with others, read texts written by others, write to others, or sign with others because we share a similar system for representing meaning."

A basic premise of whole language learning is respect for all of the child's communications. A child's thinking is responded to seriously by adults. When adults reply considerately and encouragingly to a child's use of language, they impart power to the child to create further statements and ideas that are important to her. Adult support encourages children to freely explore sounds, gestures, and words, and to make mistakes and to take risks without being corrected or dismissed for behaving foolishly. Feeling secure, children will make connections between new and old information as they extend the ways they use language in their lives.

Whole language researchers contend that literacy learning begins with young children communicating using language. As language is learned, explained Kenneth Goodman (1986, pp. 11, 18), "each developing child acquires the life view, the cultural perspective, the ways of meaning particular to its own culture." Learning the meaning of words, sounds, gestures and print "is a process of social and personal invention. Each person invents language all over again in trying to communicate with the world. But these inventions involve the use of the surrounding public language, and they are constantly tested, modified, abandoned, or perfected in use against it." Parents, siblings, and other adults do not teach language to the young child out of context, but develop it through their conversational responses to the child's initiatives.

In a whole language perspective, adults influence children's language development and their ability to learn by the ways they converse and interact

with youngsters in everyday situations. Even commonplace occurrences are viewed as being loaded with information and learning possibilities. A windy day, for example, is an opportunity to point out things to a child about the idea of cause and effect, the weather, the sky, differences in an Arctic environment as opposed to the local setting, and what the weather is called when the wind is so powerful that it blows trees out of the ground. An enormous amount of information and reflection can be exchanged in such a conversation.

Vocabulary is but one part of the learning opportunity for children in this example. The effect of the wind on the trees, a ribbon, hat, or a kite creates vivid images for the child to learn from and to enjoy. If a parent or teacher connects this experiential learning with oral language by telling a story or singing a song about the wind, or with written language by reading a story or a poem, the conversation emanating from that augments the child's information, generates questions, and may well bring a request to hear the story, song or poem again. Once adults discuss topics with children, the opportunities to form connections for further learning are virtually endless. The ideas and the language from one discussion become the beginning of other conversations. Other windy days invite the opportunity to sing the same song or to make up a new one, recite the same poem or create one of your own, and remember the story to tell orally or to read again.

In telephone conversations, my nephew Kyle, at four- and five-years-old, provided remarkable demonstrations of a child learning how to use language to communicate his ideas and feelings. He would begin by describing something he had done that day such as riding his bike up and down the hill next to his house. Then he would say without pausing, "You know what?" and launch into a description of another activity—going swimming with his sister and brother,

burying his dump truck in the front yard, or expressing excitement after finding the broken toys his mother had hidden when she cleaned his room.

He would talk on and on and each time the phrase “You know what?” would act as a bridge to the next topic. It was hard to get a word in edgewise, even when I tried to do so. Kyle needed the opportunities to express himself in oral language to adults who would listen attentively to his remarks. There is so much to learn from a child’s conversations. Adults can listen patiently and encourage youngster’s conversations about whatever they are interested in at the time.

Creating and telling jokes is another way adults and children have fun learning about language together. Children love humor and laughter resulting from language play. Jokes use words and sounds in ways that are familiar and unusual at the same time, which creates their humor as in this well-known riddle:

“What do you get when you cross a stick of dynamite with a sheep?”

“Ba Ba Ba Boom!”

The incongruity between what is known—the sounds of a sheep and of an explosion—and what is unusual—the way these two sounds are put together to make a new conclusion—is what makes kids laugh. Adults stimulate children’s imagination and play with language by allowing them many opportunities to create their own jokes, riddles and funny stories. Even when their attempts at humor do not seem amusing by adult standards, children gain the feeling of knowing something that an adult does not know, and in so doing build self-confidence and the enjoyment of language play.

Whole Language and Process Writing

Whole language practitioners define writing as constructing and communicating meaning through symbols and text. In this view, writing is best

learned by constructing genuine communications in authentic situations. As Goodman (1991, p. 281) remarked: "In authentic experiences, the participants have real, personal purposes for participation. The language used is real, relevant to the purposes and context, and comprehensible." Filling in the answers on the blanks in workbook pages to practice punctuation and capitalization rules, or writing words for spelling practice is not real writing but memory practice drills. These activities lack authenticity and relevance for the child. They may appear to be teaching something, but they are not teaching writing. A young author, like other writers, requires personal choice and decisionmaking to feel committed to the process of writing his own thoughts and ideas in print.

The terms "process writing" and "writing process" describe a way of thinking and learning about writing that originate with a writer's creative and authentic self-expressions (Elbow, 1983). Children, as Dorothy Strickland (1991, p. 20) has remarked, always seem to be "in the process of creating something." As they exercise their creative energies "through art, drama, music, movement, writing or speaking, they are apt to engage in: (1) idea stimulation and planning, (2) drafting or trying out their ideas, (3) conferring with others, (4) revising and polishing their ideas, and (5) sharing or going public with what has been created."

According to researcher Donald Graves (1983, pp. 227, 226, 229), writing flows within a process of interconnected activities that he calls rehearsing, composing, and publishing. At the center of the process is "a driving force called voice." For Graves, "voice is the imprint of ourselves on our writing." It "breathes through the entire process: rehearsal, topic choice, selection of information, composing, reading, rewriting." With young children, rehearsing, composing, and publishing may appear to be occurring simultaneously, but each

is important to the process in its own way. Table 2.1, derived from Graves, looks at the writing process from the standpoint of a young writer.

Table 2.1: A writing process model

Writing Activity	Brief Explanation	Use by Young Writers
REHEARSING	Preparing to write through warm-up activities for writing	Young children rehearse through storytelling, oral language play, conversations with adults, drawing, doodling, making letters and lists of words.
DRAFTING	Arranging ideas and written statements into a preliminary or first version of the writing.	Some writing by young children remains in draft form as in the cases of notes, lists, signs, or drawings with words added. Adults contribute ideas and give assistance when the child asks for spelling, facts, or collaboration.
SHARING	Letting others (children or adults) read the writing or using others as an audience while the writer reads the writing.	Young writers learn from the feedback received when they share their work with others.
EDITING	Revising or changing some of what has been written, sometimes including new material or eliminating existing text.	Young writers learn from the feedback received when they share their work with others.
PUBLISHING	Making writing available for others to hear or read in a completed or publicly accessible form	Children's writing can be published by reading it aloud, mailing it to friends and relatives, or binding it in book form.

Not every piece of writing is finished in one sitting. A child (or for that matter any writer) will often think about a work-in-progress over time as it is being composed. As writers consider what they want to communicate, they are drafting and editing as they go along. Often children will share their thoughts with others in the form of questions about their topic or even requests for an adult to see or hear what they have written. At the same time, not every piece of writing is rehearsed, drafted, shared, edited, redrafted, shared and published. Young writers do not function like professional authors publishing commercial books. They write for their own purposes and satisfactions, which is what adults want them to do. They may finish a piece of writing in one sitting or work on something over a period of days or weeks, revising many times. Different elements of the writing process are used at different times as each fits a specific purpose.

Children's poetry writing provides an example of how a process approach produces remarkable forms of self-expression in young writers. In *Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*, poet Kenneth Koch (1970, p. 2) describes how he coached and encouraged youngsters in a Manhattan elementary school to write verse. Visiting the school, he had been inspired by "how playful and inventive children's talk sometimes was. They said things in fresh and surprising ways. . . . they enjoyed making works of art—drawings, paintings and collages." Wondering if they would write poems in a similarly joyful and spontaneous manner, he set out to investigate. The story of how Koch and the children wrote poetry together is a study of how astonished an adult was when he allowed children to reveal their ideas by writing poetry.

Most of the youngsters did not think of themselves as writers and to most poetry "seemed something difficult and remote." Koch (1970, pp. 5-6) asked each student to contribute one line for a poem. Shuffling the lines, he read the

phrases together as a single text, some of which made sense and some of which was nonsensical. The children enjoyed this process immensely; “it made them feel like poets and it made them want to write more.” With another group, Koch suggested the children write a composition in which every line began with the statement “I wish.” He recalled:

The poems were beautiful, imaginative, lyrical, funny, touching. They brought in feelings I hadn't seen in the children's poetry before. They reminded me of my own childhood and how much I had forgotten about it. They were all innocence, elation, and intelligence. They were unified poems: it made sense where they started and where they stopped. And they had a lovely music—.

Koch concluded that when children hear poetry regularly and select their favorites, they develop a fondness for this form of expression and will write poetry just as they do journals, stories, and comics. Although poetry has long been taught in ways that make it remote from casual reading for the general public, this does not have to be. When hearing and reading poetry is exciting, suspenseful, funny, scary, and makes kids laugh, they select and recall their favorites and develop a fondness for poetic language that inspires their writing and their continued enjoyment of other poets.

Whole Language Teaching in Schools

Advocates of a whole language approach to learning recognize that children learn not only at home and in school, but from playing by themselves, interacting with peers, watching television, and through a host of other everyday situations and contexts. Goodman (1986, p. 49) offered the following keys for using a whole language framework in schools: “lots of reading and writing, risk-taking to try new functions for reading and writing, focusing on meaning.” He

rejected the assortment of workbooks, practicing of skills, and basal readers found in many classrooms. Instead, he urged teachers to allow children to explore language using interesting materials and authentic learning occasions found in homes or other everyday life situations.

Part of the basis for this conclusion comes from New Zealand. Process writing is part of the language and reading teaching in all of the country's public schools. "Almost every child is literate at an early age. The key reason is that their children learn to read by reading books—nature books, history books, science books, and storybooks. They learn to write by writing. It has been a countrywide way of teaching children to read and write for decades" (Barron, 1990, p. 7).

Reviewing the tenets of whole language teaching, one finds some startlingly different ideas and methods guiding classroom practices. Whole language teachers believe that all students can learn, value what each student knows, allow children to choose materials they want to read, look at reading as the creation of meaning rather than as the memorization of words, and include process writing as part of the language arts curriculum. They use children's literature for reading materials rather than basal readers and eschew reading instruction that emphasizes the separation of skills—phonics, spelling, handwriting, sight word memorization, comprehension—from the process of creating meaning in writing and reading. Whole language classrooms group students in many different ways, not according to traditional delineations of advanced, less advanced, and least advanced learners, as determined by test scores.

Whole language teachers consider themselves learners as well as teachers. They recognize that children have learned an enormous amount before entering school and that they will continue to learn, not only in school but in countless

social settings that involve family, peers, media, and individual play. They are “kidwatchers,” constantly evaluating children’s learning (Goodman, et al, 1984). Their observations inform their planning for each child and for the group as a whole. Children teach each other by working together. Cooperation means groups of students compare ideas, share in solving problems, and gain from a variety of communication skills they learn from each other.

A continual exploration of ideas and problem solving are hallmarks of a whole language classroom. Children inform researchers, observers and teachers about what they know through their activities, responses, and writing. They also inform each other by working together as a community of learners, sharing information and helping each other. Cooperation, problem solving and group comparison of ideas and opinions are the conditions of learning, not competition with each other. Researchers, observers and teachers refine and revise their teaching strategies based on what they learn from ongoing assessment of their own and students’ learning.

In whole language classrooms, children are involved in a variety of learning experiences that require them to think, critique and problem solve rather than to learn almost exclusively through the memorization demanded by a workbook based drill-of-skills curricula. In order to help children continue to be the curious, questioning, goal setting learners they were before entering school, whole language classrooms enlarge rather than restrict choices for children. Children choose books they want to read, topics they want to write about, and projects they want to conduct. Whole language classrooms are deliberately designed to facilitate each student’s learning.

Thinking, making choices, and observing others doing things is the same learning structure that infants and toddlers use to acquire movement and language. Children learned a great deal from self-choice as they were becoming

independent and able to communicate. The whole language learning structure is very similar to that from which children acquired their original learning before entering school. Rather than “drill children with skills and rules and procedures,” whole language settings “*do* provide information when the children are ready for it and in a way that makes sense to them” (Barron, 1990, pp. 15, 23).

A writing process approach differs dramatically from the way writing is typically taught to children. Correct spelling, letter formation and punctuation are not the bedrock literacy information needed for young children to write. The goals are for children to understand why people write, to write for themselves, to develop their skills as authors, and to use their own writing to learn conventions of print (Wilde, 1992; Read, 1986; Bean & Bouffler, 1991). When writing is thought of as a process of constructing meaning through text, a different set of assumptions informs the teacher’s methodology. The teacher considers a child’s writing real, no matter how it looks. She knows that children’s writing evolves in form and incorporates conventions as children understand them. She guides her actions to assist their acquiring further knowledge of writing, not through skill drills but through modeling and discussing writing and encouraging children to write for many purposes.

The teacher’s focus of attention in process writing is to help children convey their meaning. As each child writes, the skills of handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction are invented, practiced and learned by each one as part of his own writing—not as isolated pieces that must be learned before trying to write. Children see standard conventions of print modeled in the teacher’s writing, in charts around the room, in books and printed materials, and learn about them through direct instruction about writing. Children write daily, often choosing their own topics. This means that the child’s writing may be done

in invented spelling, strings of letters or wiggly lines that look like cursive writing, or with the inclusion of familiar conventions of print. The teacher then helps the student find a way to communicate the message to other readers or listeners.

Teaching the conventions of standard spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and form is not ignored in favor of simply allowing children to freely explore their ideas. Modeling, direct teaching and practicing are all parts of the instruction to help youngsters express ideas and publish their texts. As Lisa Delpit (1995, p. 44) explains, teaching “conventions of form” is not about “page after page of ‘skill sheets’ creating compound words or identifying nouns and adverbs, but rather about helping students gain a useful knowledge of the conventions of print while engaging in real and useful communicative activities.”

Delpit (1995, pp. 18, 45), alarmed by the low achievement scores of many African-American children, is highly critical of some whole language approaches “that view the direct teaching of skills to be restrictive to the writing process at best, and at worst, politically repressive to students already oppressed by a racist educational system.” She urged educators to teach the codes of language that enable all students to live and work within the structures of economic power so they will know the vocabulary and the rules of those codes and use them as they desire. Children “must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent.”

Delpit also states that the inclusion of children’s families in the educational process and decisions about what approaches best serve the learning needs of the community is essential to the academic success of the schools. From her perspective, “appropriate education for poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture. Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to

participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest (Delpit, 1995, p. 45)."

Home-School Connections for Writing

Research studies on home-school connections report that families and print-filled social environments provide young children with literacy knowledge; that parents' assistance through support of children's use of invented spelling writing promotes the development of children's reading and writing skills; and that parents can learn how to encourage writing at home. Summarizing the findings, the Harvard University Education Letter (1988, pp. 1-2) reported:

virtually everyone connected with schools agrees that it is important for parents to be involved in their children's education. Twenty-five years of research support their view. . . . the most direct evidence of a link between parent involvement and student achievement can be found in studies of teachers and programs that work with parents to create a home learning environment that supports school learning. . . . The researchers found improvements in students' habits, attitudes, and achievement when parents assumed an educational role, such as listening to their child read, playing informal learning games, or tutoring specific skills.

Another type of learning comes from the social nature of group writing activities. Some youngsters enjoy the companionship of sitting down and writing with other children. Just like building with blocks, riding bikes, or playing board games, they want to have fun doing things with other kids. Some parents have told us that without the company of another child, their youngsters do not write as much.

In *The New Read-Aloud Handbook*, Jim Trelease (1989) explains how parents can create in youngsters an enduring interest for reading by spending 15

minutes a day enjoying stories with their children. Personal experiences of sharing stories, feeling the emotions evoked by the text, and being together during that time are keys to developing an ongoing interest in books. Adults who tell how they began their love of reading often describe first a father's voice or a mother's attention before they mention the stories they remember.

The presence of books and adults who read to children in a household matters greatly to children's literacy development. Dolores Durkin (1982) found similar characteristics among the home environments of children who were readers before they entered school. All of the families had books, read to children, and provided ready access to paper and pencils. No one pushed or deliberately taught the youngsters to read. Instead parents or older siblings followed the lead of the child and supplied information about books, language and writing when requested to do so. Early readers came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds; one and two parent families; diverse racial and ethnic groups; and rural, suburban and urban communities.

Researchers have found that the role of parents is crucial to writing development for young children in their preschool and early school years. Stevie Hoffman, an early childhood education professor and researcher, has investigated parental influences on young children's writing development. Her article, "The Language of Teaching: Responses to Children's Developing Literacy" (1987), described the effects of parents' verbal responses on young children's writing behaviors. She found that the tone of the conversations, whether encouraging or critical of a child's efforts, influenced the child's perceptions of her knowledge and her confidence about being creative with writing.

In an earlier paper, Hoffman (1982, p. 11) described interactions between parents and children in the context of planned home reading and writing activities. Parents and children were taped before and after children experienced

their first grade language arts program and before and after parents and children worked with the research project teacher who used the same whole language instructional model for teaching reading and writing as the classroom teacher. Changes in the parents' instructional methods and responses to their children's efforts were more evident in writing than in reading: "... without exception, all of these parents were far more comfortable with and supportive of the child's self-help model of writing than they were of that model of reading. It may be that because children brought home their self-authored and invented spelling texts, parents saw a developmental process taking place and recognized and accepted learning to write more like they accepted the child's learning to talk in uniquely self-authored and nonconventional beginning language."

From research about children's literacy development and parental involvement with their children's invented spelling writing, new information has emerged about ways to encourage children's learning. Barbara Bode (1988) conducted a five month study of 204 first grade students from three schools in a central Florida school district. Children were divided into three groups and matched for achievement levels, socioeconomic status, and language arts teaching methods used in their classrooms. Three methods of teaching children to read and write were contrasted: a classroom language arts curriculum that included dialogue journal writing with parents at home; a classroom language arts curriculum that included dialogue journal writing with the teacher at school; and a classroom language arts curriculum that included no dialogue journal writing.

One third of the children wrote dialogue journals with their parents three times a week in invented spelling. Parents modeled correct mechanics in their written responses and the conventional spelling of words from their child's text. One third of the children wrote dialogue journals in invented spelling with their teacher three times a week. The teacher's written responses also demonstrated

correct mechanics and the conventional spelling of words written in students' invented spelling. The other third of the children did no dialogue journal writing.

In the statistics derived from the post-testing of the three groups, the parent-child dialogue journal writers scored higher on every variable (Holistic Writing, Reading Comprehension, Dictated Spelling, Listening Comprehension, and Sentence Formation) than the control group of non-dialogue journal writers and higher in all but Holistic Writing than the teacher-child dialogue journal writers, as measured by the Stanford Achievement Test and the Metropolitan Achievement Writing Test. Bode (1988, p.9) asserted "that dialogue journal writing is an essential approach to beginning literacy whether it is administered by parent, teacher, or older student singly or in combination with each other."

How then do some youngsters become independent writers at home while others do not? The explanation does not reside exclusively with the children. It does not appear that some are more naturally gifted or talented. More frequent writers do not necessarily possess greater literacy knowledge or greater ease in communicating their thoughts on paper than less frequent writers. Instead, what research found are that differences in home influences affect children's experiences with writing. Independent, self-sustaining writers have involvement and guidance from parents and other adults who regularly do some or all of the following activities:

- Read aloud to a child
- Make materials readily available and accessible
- Praise a youngster's efforts at oral and written communication
- Suggest writing as an activity
- Display writing in the home or workplace
- Talk about and point out print
- Listen to a child's oral stories

- Answer a child's questions about language
- Take dictation for a child
- Send writing to relatives and friends
- Read to others what a child has written
- Establish regular family writing times during the day or week
- Brainstorm and discuss possible topics and stories

Parents who expect children to acquire writing in the same way that they acquire other skills encourage the exploration of writing using the same supportive strategies that successfully assisted their child's learning in other areas. They define writing as communicating one's thoughts to others using symbols, words, and pictures—not just as ease of forming letters, correctly spelling words, or using punctuation in text. They accept a child's performances as evolving, and understand that writing conventions will develop over time as the child learns more about written language from creating it, asking questions about it, and observing it in books, media, and public places.

Children develop their capacity to walk, talk, and perform other skills with the involvement and assistance of the important grown-ups in their lives. Young children try to talk before adults recognize their words, although parents and other individuals in daily contact with a toddler learn the meanings of “baby talk.” Early writing has a similar pattern of development. When a child scribbles on a piece of paper and declares, “This says. . . ,” that youngster is creating meaning with written language. Children can communicate in non-standard oral language and in non-standard written language. When parents realize that some marks on paper are intended to mean something, they can act as interpreters of the writing just as they interpreted the child's early speech. With consistent and positive support from parents, young children will believe that they can write

before knowing how to spell or form letters correctly, and before receiving reading and writing instruction at school.

In some families, a process approach to writing is as natural as talking with a child. Paper, pencils and other writing tools are always available to youngsters. Parents answer children's questions about writing and spelling and compliment the child's efforts, whether it be in scribbles, shapes or invented spellings. Writing is supported in the same ways that parents facilitated their child's development of movement and speech—through complimenting and supporting risk taking, expecting mistakes, taking dictation, writing a message in standard spelling next to the child's invented spelling, and offering assistance when the child needs it. Children have ready access to writing materials, receive continual encouragement for their explorations with print, and are praised rather than criticized for their efforts.

Some adults think of writing as a task rather than an enjoyable activity which is not something they choose to do regularly. When these feelings are modeled by adults at home, children do not experience writing as a natural skill which they can do easily and independently. By contrast, young children's writing flourishes when adults integrate writing into the regular aspects of their family life. Parents might encourage children to write grocery lists, birthday cards, thank-you notes, dinner menus, and many other kinds of quick and easy written communications. In supportive home settings, children will also produce longer and complex chapter books, personal journals, fictional characters and stories, personal experience nonfiction stories, and imaginative play with words and letters. The age and skill level of the child are not the determining factors of success of these and many other writing activities. It is ongoing interest from and encouragement of parents that are the keys to a child's risk taking and success with writing from an early age.

Although teachers and administrators generally seek and encourage parent participation in their child's learning, and sometimes go to great lengths to get it, the parent or the family is most often expected to accept the school's direction about how to interact with their child and learning. Through Open Houses where teachers explain the curriculum expectations and teaching methods, homework with established expectations of how it will be completed, and formal or informal requests to parents to read to or with their child, the school attempts to direct the parent-child interaction. The assumption is that the professionals know best and this attitude blocks positive, effective linkages between home and school that would connect both to the goal of fostering children's writing development.

Collaborations for Learning and School Change

Creating a home-school partnership between parents and teachers is not an easy or simple process. The "c" words—cooperation, coordination, collaboration—do not happen spontaneously between adults. Mandates by school personnel or community leaders do not ensure that working together will result. Partnerships for improving schools, as Byrd Jones and Robert Maloy (1988) have documented, mean shared benefits and shared risks for everyone involved. They happen only after much hard work and when all partners perceive that they can gain personally and professionally as the result of collaborative actions.

At the outset, several factors can stand in the way of parents and teachers working together as partners. First, educators have definite views about what roles they think parents should play in schools, but the roles are not necessarily those that parents themselves think they should play:

Teachers believe that parents should prepare children for the school day, reinforce the importance of homework, and accept responsibility for

socialization skills. Parents seek influence over curriculum, disciplinary procedures, and staff evaluations primarily for their own children. (Jones & Maloy, 1988, p. 72)

Second, some teachers are threatened when parents step outside of their traditional roles and assert an active voice in how classrooms ought to be run. Those teachers feel that educators, and not parents or others outside the classroom, should be the ones to decide how curriculum and instruction should be organized in schools. Third, some teachers allow social status and income to determine their sense of a child's potential—to the detriment of children from low-income and minority backgrounds, those who speak English as a new language, and youngsters with a handicapping condition.

In the face of these barriers, collaboration between parents and teachers requires support and trust among the partners. Working together must be based on mutual respect and a willingness to address complex issues of learning. All partners must have substantive roles to play and a genuine voice in decision-making. Jones and Maloy (1988, p. 11) describe successful joint arrangements as “interactive partnerships” where ideas, resources and people move back and forth between home and school. “Goals and objectives are not specifically defined in advance, but emerge and shift as they negotiate the terms of their mutual efforts.” Cooperation replaces criticism as adults look for ways to improve schools for all students.

How have educators and parents been locked into the ways things have historically been done in education? Why do ideas for change come and go with so many elementary and secondary schools doing little that is innovative or different for their students? Throughout a long career, sociologist Seymour Sarason (1971; 1982; 1990) has tried to explain why it is that despite so many exciting ideas for educational reform—the new math, flexible scheduling, learning

by objectives, computer-assisted instruction—outcomes for students in school remain largely the same.

An important part of the problem, believes Sarason, is that most of us have long held and rarely challenged beliefs about how education should be conducted in schools. For example, most parents and educators assume that children should go to school for a set number of days; that they should be taught certain subjects at certain grade levels; and that they should be assessed and rewarded according to their scores on basic skills tests. Adults are reluctant to deviate from established patterns. The values imposed by the educational system and the day-to-day regularities of bureaucratic organizations form a school culture that effectively washes out individual curricular changes.

A predictable process occurs when reformers propose change in schools. People try an innovation, but implementation is seldom smooth. Possible change generates powerful counterpressures. Some in the school or community, for various reasons including their own self-interests, oppose the reform directly. Slowly the momentum for the idea begins to fade away. Some contend that things were better before “they” started making all these changes. Reformers become frustrated because their proposals seldom affect the school’s underlying norms and values. Eventually, original practices are reinstated and the change idea is abandoned. In this process, as Dwight Allen has noted, “the status quo wins by default.”

In *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*, Sarason (1990, p. 63) saw “altering power relationships” in schools and classrooms as the first step to fundamentally changing educational systems. Parent and teacher participation will not automatically guarantee better decisionmaking. But it is the right thing to do because “those who are vitally affected by decisions should stand in some meaningful relation to the decision-making process.” Giving power to students

to express themselves and to pursue their own interests in the classroom is also important to meaningful change.

According to Sarason (1990, pp. 84, 85, 89), many “classrooms are uninteresting places in part (and only in part) because students feel, and are made to feel, powerless to influence the traditional regularities of the classroom.” For students to remain committed to school, “the classroom should be a place where those in it come to feel that they will be governed by rules and values they have had an opportunity to discuss.” Cooperative learning arrangements are an example of altered power relationships in classrooms. Teachers give up whole-class, teacher-dominated teaching methods in favor of letting small groups of children work independently on projects and assignments. The results are clear: “student interest and motivation is far higher than in the usual ‘whole class’ method of teaching” and “cooperative, small-group approach is as effective as the conventional one and, more often than not, is superior.”

Despite Sarason’s discouraging depiction of how school cultures can derail change, it is possible to build better schools in all kinds of communities under widely varying economic and political circumstances. Ronald Edmonds (1978; 1982) and other researchers of “effective schools” have identified the characteristics of successful places where all children learn: positive school leadership, agreement on goals and objectives, high expectations for students, a safe and orderly climate, and continual monitoring and feedback on student achievement. Many change advocates include parent involvement as an essential condition for promoting learning for all youngsters (Henderson, 1981).

Effective schools are not created instantly. They improve classroom by classroom and program by program. Most teachers do some things well for at least most students, and in every school there are individuals who establish effective learning climates in their rooms. By themselves, these efforts remain

exceptions. Yet within a school-wide focus or commitment to effectiveness every teacher can contribute to a positive organizational climate that brings about improved educational outcomes for children.

A change in a writing program for older elementary students in a school may produce a willingness to try similar adjustments in the writing program for the younger grades. In some schools, teachers and/or administrators are willing to try new ideas or fresh approaches such as whole language, process writing, or parent involvement on a limited or experimental basis. Instead of completely changing the entire writing program, children freewrite in personal journals once a week or read stories written at home to classmates during one of the flexible times of the school day or week.

Teachers face almost unmanageable burdens in trying to provide instructional options for many different youngsters. They need ideas that will lessen the stress and pressure of the work. When teachers discover that an idea can help them, they often become open to further explorations and changes within the school structure. Ultimately for children to get the most out of their school experiences, teachers need strategies and approaches that lessen the burdens of teaching while enabling improvements to take place in classroom learning. It is in the classroom under the leadership of a teacher that the kind of education parents want for their children will or will not happen.

Conclusions

Young children enjoy creating characters and stories; recording realities and fantasies on paper; communicating their ideas to others through written language. Researchers now know that young children develop understandings of writing and reading in the course of their day-to-day interactions with other people—parents, teachers and older children—and through television, media, and

the public print they see around them. A child's early explorations of writing are more likely to be enjoyed and continued when adults thoughtfully and sensitively support these efforts at written self-expression. Over time, as children and adults engage in writing together, new family relationships emerge—children think of themselves as writers while parents, teachers and caregivers become the coaches of their written communication.

The research reviewed here concludes that a primary constructor of literacy information and understanding is the home environment. The parents and family are the child's first teachers. From them the child's information about literacy development and learning are formed. The interactions of the home environment, irrespective of the socio-economic level or the status of single or double parent families, are the conveyors of the information that Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) and Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) found helped children build the knowledge they had when entering school. School instructional methodologies generally do not recognize children's understanding of written language, contradicting the idea that the school knows best how to instruct young children.

The research shows considerable disagreement within the field of education concerning the expectations of educators for the role of parents in the education of their children. But in the methodology of process writing, families, teachers and children are all equally important to the success of the approach. The playing field of learning for all three of the participant groups is leveled by the newness of the methodology. Families have already used and tested the learning approach of encouraging their children to become literate and communicative speakers in their home language through encouragement, compliments, and practice in authentic situations and conversations.

Educators adopting these approaches to assist students to become literate writers can draw on the same methodologies that parents used with their children at home in early written language activities. In effect educators learned from parents, the child's first teachers, how to develop a new classroom teaching strategy. And they can involve parents in this home-school connection for learning by describing the foundation of process writing as evolving from home teaching of oral language. All of the collaborators in this partnership have key roles as important teachers and learners, united in the goal of successful learning with writing and reading for every child.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The dissertation uses a case study methodology to describe how a writing curriculum evolved in a single elementary school classroom over a period of eight years. The goal is to show the classroom evolution in teaching practices and curriculum delivery resulting from a teacher's engagement with a process of educational change. Most of the new developments described in this study were unplanned—that is, they were not conceptualized in advance nor implemented using experimental and control groups, and then evaluated according to pre-established criteria.

Rather, my modifications to established teaching practices and curriculum delivery were initially prompted by children's and families' experiences using the Writing Boxes, and then incorporated into my overall approach to the teaching of writing. To reinforce emerging new activities and to support children's writing, new writing projects were introduced into the classroom schedule. These new activities quickly expanded to include other modifications and new ideas, one leading to another from the experiences that preceded them. The overall result was a transformation of how, why, and when writing occurs in this classroom.

Case studies supply a particularly appropriate methodology for describing what occurs when teachers undertake change efforts in their classrooms. Detailed descriptions of classroom changes offer other educators a way to examine key dimensions of evolving teaching practices. As two researchers noted:

Description may not lead us to the skills we need to act; but description may help us understand the social realities of school improvement. With

these understandings, we can continue to build a way to improve schools. We need to attend to how teachers actually work, how they come to learn their work, how schools function as complex social organizations, and how the process of change takes form. (Lieberman and Miller, 1984, p. 95)

Setting of the Study

The setting described in this study is one of ten classrooms in the Mark's Meadow Laboratory School in Amherst, Massachusetts. Mark's Meadow is a public school jointly operated by the Amherst (Massachusetts) Public Schools and the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, whose students come from the surrounding neighborhood. The community that surrounds Mark's Meadow is a widely diverse mix of families from the United States and countries around the world that includes different ethnic, linguistic, religious, racial and socioeconomic groups.

In its role as a demonstration laboratory site for the University's School of Education, Mark's Meadow supports public school teachers and university faculty in work related to preparing teachers and conducting educational research. University students participate in prepracticum and practicum teaching experiences at the school every semester. Mark's Meadow faculty teach their elementary school classes, guest lecture in university courses, supervise student teachers, and some do research as part of their role as Demonstration Teachers in the School of Education.

Student enrollment at Mark's Meadow during the time period of this study has reached a high of 350 at the beginning of the study and gradually decreased to its present enrollment of 195 children. The students, ages 5 through 12-years old, reside in apartments or single family homes with almost as many single parent

as two parent families. Between 100 and 150 students are bilingual or trilingual; 20 to 40 enroll annually who speak English as a new language. Between 50 to 60 percent of the students qualify for the district's free breakfast and lunch program.

From 1978 to 1992, Mark's Meadow was the only elementary school within the Amherst-Pelham School District to combine multiage students in nongraded classrooms. Other schools grouped children by combining grades in some classrooms. When the Writing Box study commenced all classrooms at Mark's Meadow comprised a two to four year student age span. The six-to eight-year-old age group was part of the Early Learning Center. In the past five years a graded structure has been gradually reestablished with half of the ten classrooms becoming single grades and five, including mine, remaining multiage, two grade level combinations.

Associations between classes of widely differing ages is an established feature of the school. These are designed by individual teachers working together in year long or occasional collaborations. The oldest and youngest children have been partnered for reading and writing activities and for varied experiences such as block building experiments. At present, the ten classrooms represent a philosophy of hands-on, child-centered education as interpreted by individual teachers.

In my classroom of six-, seven-, and eight-year-old children, curriculum is not restricted by grade level. Heterogeneous multiage groups for instruction are used more often than are homogeneous multiage groups. Special education students and non-English speakers are integrated with regular education, native English speakers. Methodologies for instruction emphasize children's conversations and questions, writing, reading, problem-solving, discoveries, exploratory play, and enjoyment of learning.

Approximately 60 of the children who participated in the Writing Box project were in the class two years in a row; three students stayed for three years. Over eight years 175 students have received Writing Boxes to use at home. Throughout the eight years, curriculum design and service delivery has intentionally emphasized oral and written language development. For three years between 1990 and 1993, a Speech and Language teacher joined the classroom in a half-time co-teaching model to implement a program emphasizing language and literacy learning in all curriculum areas. I have implemented a whole language approach employing oral and written expression as the basis for children's learning in the classroom.

Information Collection

During the eight years of the Writing Box project, a variety of research strategies were used to collect information about the children and their home and classroom writing activities. The primary research strategy involved collecting children's writing samples during each year of the project. The writing samples provided an ongoing record of what children were writing at different times of the school year and during different years of the project.

Samples of writing done by children were selected by myself, the teacher/researcher, for each of the writing activities being conducted in the classroom. Copies of the writing were made and stored in files labeled as follows: letters, notes/lists/signs, menus, poetry, stories, I wonder journals, conventions, and technology. Only during the first two years was an effort made to copy everything written by every child; after that I copied representative samples of the kinds of writing being done throughout each of the following years. In addition to classroom writing, selected writing from home was also copied and included in the writing files.

Other research strategies were also used, although none of these strategies were conducted for all the years of the study or with all of the children. Each provides additional information that contributes to this case study. These data sources include:

a) Diaries and observations of activities in the classroom over five years, 1988-93, were compiled by the researcher as part of the requirements of graduate classes and independent study projects completed during the coursework phase of my doctoral program. The history of the first two years of the project has also been documented in a journal article in *Contemporary Education* (Edwards & Maloy, 1990).

b) Surveys from families were conducted to provide information pertaining to writing occurring in home activities of 42 families whose children were students in my classroom at Mark's Meadow in 1988-89 and 1989-90. These surveys collected information about the varieties of writing and reading experiences occurring in homes before the introduction of the Writing Box.

c) Group meetings with parents were held every year throughout the eight years of the study except 1994-95. That year, half the class was returning from the previous year. I bought materials for a summer Writing Box for those students and the Boxes were distributed in June. I was also busy doing writing workshops and presentations in connection with the publication of *Kids Have All the Write Stuff*.

More than half of the families voluntarily attended the twice a year, evening meetings at school with childcare provided to discuss the use of the Writing Box in homes. The agenda for the first meeting included an explanation of the intent of using invented spelling process writing with children, the purpose of the Writing Box, and the suggestion that parents use activities from the Family Home Writing Guide to encourage their child's writing at home. At the second

meeting I inquired about writing at home and shared writing ideas that were happening in different families. During the fifth and sixth year, two meetings were held that involved families in writing as part of the night's activities. The agenda was slightly different from the other years because parents, grandparents and guardians wrote with their children and then published the writing by reading it aloud.

d) Interviews with six families (half the number involved in the study in each of the first two years) were conducted six months after the Writing Boxes went home in Spring 1989. I wanted to know what writing ideas families had tried with their children and whether or not children had become self-initiated, self-directed writers at home. I interviewed two children who consistently brought their home writing to school, two who occasionally brought writing, and two who rarely brought writing. Interviews of all of the children in the classroom during the first year and most of the children in the second year were done to assess children's attitudes about writing and to ask about children's writing outside of school.

Presentation of the Findings

My description of changes in curriculum design and instructional practices in the classroom will be presented in a generally chronological order from the beginning of the Writing Box project in the 1988-89 school year to the most recently concluded 1995-96 school year. I begin with a "prehistory," move to initial changes, and conclude with recent developments and evolving activities.

"Prehistory" is a term used by Seymour Sarason (1971) to describe normal behaviors, current conditions, and personal relationships present in an organizational setting prior to the implementation of a change process. I use it here to convey a sense of my writing/language arts teaching practices and

grouping patterns before the Writing Boxes went home for the first time in November, 1988. As such, prehistory serves as a baseline or starting point for documenting change in children's writing in my classroom.

"Initial changes" describe a series of largely unexpected and unplanned for changes that took place over the first four years of the project. These developments roughly coincide with the completion of *Kids Have All the Write Stuff*. Children's writing at home or in the classroom was the impetus for most of these initial modifications to my classroom curriculum. I continually found that new writing activities were needed to complement or follow-up on children's writing interests, and through use, these activities then became ongoing, well-established features of the classroom.

"Recent developments" refer to activities that have taken place since the publication of the book and include the 1995-96 school year. In some cases, these latest innovations represent expansions of activities that began during the first years of the project. In other cases, these reforms are new developments that emerged from my expanding definition of children as writers as well as children's own evolving ideas about what they might do with written language.

Throughout the process of change initiated by the Writing Boxes, I was guided by a series of major propositions drawn from the literature on school change. According to the Rand Study of federally supported innovations, (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978), "successful" programs involve participants adapting and modifying the situation to fit their own circumstances and needs. I continually shifted and changed classroom activities in response to the children's needs as learners and to mine as a teacher and a student. Changes in curriculum and instruction followed from adaptations and modifications of existing practices that over time became established as regular features of the classroom, its curriculum, and my teaching methodologies.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This chapter describes changing strategies for teaching writing in a single elementary school classroom for six, seven and eight year-old children between 1988 and 1996 as part of a study I call the "Writing Box Project." These changes were largely unplanned at the inception of the project; they evolved one year to the next as I recognized ways to support children's writing at home with their Writing Boxes and at school through new writing activities.

The key question addressed in this chapter is how writing by young children—either as a self-chosen or adult-directed learning activity—continuously changed instructional methods, curriculum integration, teaching roles, and classroom structures in my primary grade classroom. The chapter is divided into six sections that encompass the major writing activities done by children during the Writing Box study: Public and Personal Communications, the "Before Noon News," Poetry, Stories, "I Wonder" Journals, and Technology. Each section, presented in narrative form, begins with a brief prehistory, is followed by descriptions of children's initial writing activities, and concludes with the latest writing developments in the classroom.

Public and Personal Communications

Notes, lists, signs, and morning messages are all forms of public communications intended to convey information to more than one reader or listener. Before the Writing Box project, notes, lists, signs, and morning messages were not written by children in the classroom. As I began investigating the influence of children's writing on their reading, I encouraged public

communications in the classroom to initiate new writing opportunities that demonstrated the power of written language to the students. I asked children to write their public communications whenever the circumstances seemed appropriate: “Hang a sign;” “Write a note and put it on the refrigerator;” or “Make a list” became familiar classroom refrains. Quickly, children wrote signs, notes and lists for their purposes and for mine.

Other forms of public communications appeared spontaneously as the children and I started writing statements that we had previously only expressed orally:

- Reminders (“Remember to feed the goldfish.”);
- Announcements (“Kyle will be leaving school early today.”);
- Messages (“Two cookies each.”);
- Requests (“Please buy batteries.”); and
- Advertisements (“Clock shop. Watches and clocks for sale.”).

Each year, public communications provided demonstrations of how a few words communicate important meanings to writers and readers. On one occasion, a child needed food dyes for a science project. Stating that I had forgotten to buy these items for her once after she asked, I suggested she write me a reminder note and put it on the refrigerator where I would see it at the end of the day (see Figure 4.1). I did not forget the materials after receiving this written request. After that, I kept a piece of paper taped to the refrigerator on which kids recorded items they needed from the grocery store.

I also started a regular practice of asking children to write reminder notes to themselves about anything that they forgot to bring to school each day—backpacks, shoes, boots, library books, snacks, or home practice. They wrote notes to their families to communicate snack suggestions. I pointed out that if the person who had sent the snack knew that the child did not want it, the snack

packer might have sent something else. But if the snack packer had no information, this unwanted snack would probably appear again, causing the child to have the same response a second time. Therefore, it would be helpful if the child wrote a list of acceptable snack choices for the snack packer to choose from.

We wrote lists to keep track of who was chosen to do one of the daily jobs that kids did in the classroom—writing news, menus, and weather; introducing the “Before Noon News” group meeting; reading the Sharing Meeting list; being on the “in charge” team when an adult is not in the room; building with the blocks; feeding the fish; and caring for the milkweed bugs. These lists eliminated arguments occasioned by conflicting memories of who had done what job when.

I did not edit the content or the appearance of these public communications even though most of them were written in invented spelling that occasionally could not be read without the assistance of the author (who also might not exactly recall what it said). I did not see a need to include in the writing process an editing and rewriting step that may be time-consuming and difficult for the children. It seemed more important for them to get the feedback and satisfaction that comes from completing a writing activity right then and there. Interestingly, the young readers in the classroom seemed to understand without much difficulty the writer’s intended message in these communications.

Signs

In all of my years of teaching, I recall only one child-written sign appearing spontaneously before the Writing Box. There may have been a few others, but not recognizing their significance, I have forgotten them. Perhaps because this event was unique, I remember the circumstances even though it occurred 14 years ago. Gordon Simm, age six, wrote a sign, hung it around his neck, and wore it to

Morning Meeting. He stood in front of the class and read his sign aloud, "My name is Frank Birdseed Simm."

As he looked out at the audience, I inquired, "Do you want us to call you Frank from now on, Gordon?"

"Frank or Frankie is fine," he replied firmly.

I noticed that he had spelled his new name in standard spelling and that his letter formation was neat. But I made no comment about his announcement and asked no questions about what had prompted his idea. We called him Frank for a couple of weeks till he changed his name back to Gordon. In retrospect, I assume that because I made no public comment about the importance of signs or Gordon's smart use of one, that no other child made a connection about how she or he might use sign writing in the room.

Seeking to promote more public writing by children during the first year of the Writing Box project, I waited for an opportunity to suggest that a child write a sign. "Do Not Touch" was the first—and it has always been the first one each year since. Using the first letter sounds of each word, one child wrote D N T and taped it on a building he was constructing in the block area. After he wrote and displayed his sign, other children followed the example and wrote signs, too. I then began asking the students to make signs for many purposes: to advise others not to touch block buildings or projects; to reserve the computer that someone wanted to use later; and to remind me to do something later in the day.

The children wrote signs in their own spelling. They watched each other and usually wrote very similar spellings to those that they saw in each others' signs. Some of them used combinations of words and pictures to communicate their messages, but words were always present. Not realizing that different kids would do widely different things with public writing, the next year I was greatly surprised by a child-created sign that included no words. I had suggested to one

of the students that he write a Do Not Touch sign for his block building. This youngster, who had just returned to Amherst from a summer visit to his grandparents and extended family in Holland, drew a picture of a hand, made a circle around the hand and put a diagonal line through it, introducing a picture symbol needing no words to announce its message. Other kids read this sign and used the picture symbol for their Do Not Touch signs, too.

I wondered what I might say to validate his public communication, while introducing the use of words in signs. Not having a ready response, I said nothing. Because of my inexperience with the wide range of children's writing for public communications, I was thinking that without words, the signs were not as valuable for teaching and learning. I saw the error of my thinking by observing how the children learned from his sign. One day a student brought her teddy bear to school. She was worried that it might be damaged by the other children. I suggested she write a message indicating her concern. Soon she hung a sign next to the bear (see Figure 4.2). Because she had composed a sign whose meaning we all understood, she was confident that the other children would not disturb the bear. And they did not.

Since the beginning of the Writing Box study, all kinds of signs have been displayed in the room. Children regularly use signs to reserve a place on the large wooden climbing structure in the middle of the room, the piano, the computers, and other materials before morning meeting, at recess or at you choose time. Signs are hung to instruct others, with and without my prior knowledge. For example: "Don't push too hard on the Easter Eggs or they will break." "Climber is closed." "Don't walk here." Flaps hanging over the opening to kids' cubbies declare, "Private."

One of the unexpected and wonderful developments of kids' signs has been their move from inside the classroom to out into the school corridors.

Walking to the classroom one day before Morning Meeting, I noticed a piece of paper taped to the wall that had not been there when I had passed by a few minutes before. Reading it I realized that it had come from inside our classroom. Entering the room, I saw another sign hung on one of the tables where four girls were busily constructing wrist watches from scrap paper, stamping clock faces on the watches and finishing them with notched paper bands that fit a child's wrist (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4). The paper wrist watches were free to anyone who wanted one.

None of this activity occurred from my suggestion nor did anyone ask for my consent to do it. The wrist watch design and manufacturing team felt enough ownership of the time, space and materials in the room to establish their business without consulting me. They felt enough confidence within the school to advertise their product in the hallway for everyone to see.

Kristina, the originator of the wrist watch idea, hung her clock sign a few weeks after she had heard me suggest to another child that it would be a good idea to make signs to hang in the halls to announce the loss of a ring in the sandbox on the playground. The youngster who lost the ring made four signs with drawings of the missing jewelry, our room number, and the promise of a reward. Then she and her friends taped them to the corridor walls and we waited.

I noticed kids from other classes stopping to read the signs. This surprised me. I did not know if older kids would even glance at a younger child's writing or be able to read the spelling. I mentioned to one group of older sign readers that we did not know if a lost ring could be found in the sandbox but that we hoped it would be and that we would provide a reward. Two weeks later, the ring appeared in the hand of a fifth grader, who brought it in with a group of her friends, grinning as she showed us what she had found. Whether or not she had set out to search for it or had just found it during play, we did not ask. To our

great surprise and delight, the ring was returned! The owner and I delivered a package of cookies to the class of the child who found the ring. The reward was promised, delivered, and enjoyed by her class because of the sign and her efforts.

What an event that was! The importance of public communication was recognized through an authentic demonstration of its usefulness and power. Where there had not been spontaneous writing displayed in the school by children before, there was now. When youngsters wanted to communicate their messages to other people in the school building, other public signs telling of lost items appeared in the halls, all designed and hung by kids in their own spelling. Before such child-created signs from my room appeared on the corridor walls, the only writing displayed there had been done as part of a classroom's curriculum. Signs requesting assistance to find something or announcing free give aways were new occurrences.

Not all of the missing items were found, but this fact did not appear to affect the use of the signs that continued to be hung in the school throughout the following years. The year after the lost ring was found, a youngster in my class announced that she had lost her best stuffed penguin named Piwit. I suggested that she make signs for the hallways. She drew pictures of Piwit, wrote the sign in her own spelling, and promised a reward to the finder. After three months of waiting without response to her signs, I inquired when she had lost Piwit. "A year ago," she replied matter of factly.

Perhaps she had seen the signs for the lost ring when she was in kindergarten and decided in first grade that she should do something she had not yet done in her search for Piwit. But sadly, the entire school year passed without a word about Piwit, despite the signs. However, in the fall of the next school year she stopped me in the hallway to announce excitedly, "I found Piwit!"

"Where?" I inquired incredulously.

“At the dentist’s office!” she exclaimed.

I laughed aloud. When I told other kids from her first grade class where she had found the penguin, they were as astonished and amused as I. Her public writing was the common denominator of our mutual interest. This was an informative event for me. Kids read other kids’ signs and wonder what will result from them. Just telling the class about Piwit would not have created the same curiosity that her writing had produced.

The following year, when a youngster lost the locket on her necklace, I suggested that she make signs. Because of the locket’s small size, I advised her to draw a large picture of it to catch people’s attention, and to add an actual sized drawing in the corner. The locket was not found, but we were unsure that it had been lost at school. What this use of signs showed me was how they might be broadened to include curriculum naturally, as this one highlighted scale size as well as written information.

Sometimes, the size of a sign relates to the sense of urgency felt by the sign writer. During 1994-95 school year, one child repeatedly requested that I make room for a “good junk area” but all of my promises did not make it so. I suggested that she make a sign for me to hang on the window so that I would have to pay attention to it. This one was banner-sized. I hung it in the classroom where everyone could see it. When the child arrived back at school after summer vacation, I had a spot ready for the “good junk area” underneath the banner. She was very pleased to see her sign displayed and her request honored. I suggested that she help fill the area by composing a letter to families requesting donations of good junk, which she did and we sent copies home.

I had not considered how to use children’s signs and posters more broadly within the curriculum till 1994-95 when two girls beautifully printed the word *history* on a sheet of paper. Having learned that kids examine other kids’ writing

with interest, I recognized that their work should be displayed in a prominent place and highlighted in the curriculum. I incorporated their paper into my writing of a social studies question, "Who makes history, you, me, who?" Attaching it to a larger background, I hung the sign on the closet next to our class meeting area where I could often refer to it in conversation. I began many discussions standing beside the poster and pointing to the words as we read the "who makes history" question aloud.

As kids made pictures or wrote words, I began incorporating them into my signs displayed in prominent spots around the classroom. One of the girls who created the colorful page for history made my name in cut-out letters of her own design glued onto a background. I saved this paper and incorporated it in a sign displayed outside the classroom during the first week of school the next Fall—"Welcome to Ms. Edwards's Room." Seeing the sign on the first day of school, she commented smilingly, "That's the one I made for you."

Morning Messages

Morning messages became a daily form of public communication in the classroom during the second year of the Writing Box project. My initial intent for writing and reading morning messages with the class was to create a structure for introducing predictable, repeating words in public messages that children read at the start of each school day. I thought that the predictability and repetition of vocabulary would help beginning readers to remember the words and write them in standard spelling.

The words I chose for the morning message became part of the sight vocabulary for beginning readers. The repetition assisted children to recall the words and read each public communication with growing ease and independence as the months went by. I often saw beginning readers standing at the morning

messages reading them by themselves when they realized that they could do this alone.

The format of the message remained consistent throughout that year (see Table 4.1):

Table 4.1. Daily morning message format

Greeting	Hi, hi, hi everybody!
Announcement	Today we have music.
Information	Recess is out today.
Closing	Love, Ms. Edwards

When I took a first semester sabbatical during the 1990-91 school year, the teacher who taught in my place began writing the morning messages with children. It had not occurred to me that this approach would be a way to use the morning message to inspire writing as well as to provide a daily reading experience. When I returned to the classroom in January, I again wrote the morning messages by myself, not realizing that by sharing the activity with the children even more writing could be included in the public communications they were doing regularly. I revised my thinking and my practice when some of the kids asked to write the message with me.

The children and I divided the writing. Each day I did some and a few kids did some. By the end of the year, I was writing the message some days and the children were writing without my involvement on other days. Giving the children the responsibility for the message also gave them the freedom of choice about what to write, generating a wide variety of styles and purposes to the morning messages. By not prescribing what or how to write, some wrote

messages very much like the ones that I had designed for the purpose of practicing predictable reading. Others changed the format dramatically, doing things that I had never considered—writing an acrostic poem with information about the daily schedule, adding flaps and pull tabs, and leaving spaces for kids to fill in spelling and missing punctuation as the class read the morning message together.

Sometimes parts of the message were written in cursive because first and second graders yearn for opportunities to write in cursive. We even had morning messages published on a TV screen using the SuperNintendo Mario Paints program. With this electronic tool, message writers could turn letters upside down or backwards on the screen causing great excitement and interest when others recognized and corrected what they done. They could try to read the mystery message or turn the letters around to their correct positions. I also occasionally invited kids who had been in our class and moved to older classrooms to write the message. They sometimes composed messages together and included acrostic poems and used cursive writing. The kids in my class found these interesting. “Who wrote that?” was their chorused refrain.

Letters and Cards

“Personal communications” in the forms of letter and card writing became an important feature of the classroom curriculum during the past four years of the Writing Box project (1992-96). Who does not look forward to receiving letters through the mail—written messages that might contain surprises as well as greetings? Children certainly do! They love to receive mail and they also enjoy writing letters to say hello to a friend; to share the family or neighborhood news; to request information; to ask or answer a question; and to share artwork and

jokes. Cards are sent as unique gifts, for invitations, or to express appreciation or good wishes.

Prior to the Writing Boxes, children had occasionally written letters as part of the classroom curriculum, but not in any regular fashion over time. I had not used letter writing as an ongoing part of the reading-writing curriculum or as a form of personal communication between classmates or between children and me. I assumed that letters must be written using standard spelling, complete sentences, capitalization, punctuation, and a proper form from date and greeting to closing.

Achieving correct conventions in letters was a complicated endeavor for youngsters, requiring my editing and their recopying. Editing was time consuming, sometimes frustrating, and often not an enjoyable activity for the students. The spontaneous joy of communicating was replaced by the arduous process of attending to "making it right" for the reader. And after all of our efforts, no child that I was aware of wrote letters spontaneously at school or at home, even though they all enjoyed receiving mail from their penpals.

Occasionally I initiated a letter writing project with the students as part of the social studies curriculum because I thought it was important enough to warrant everyone's time and concentration to edit letters before mailing them. One year we wrote to penpals outside the U.S.A. and exchanged two letters with them. Another year we sent birthday greetings in letters to Rosa Parks in Detroit. When we had reading partners with an older class of students in Mark's Meadow, we composed Valentines for them in February and thank you letters to them in May.

Sometimes we composed group letters of appreciation to other classes who had produced a play or done something special, or to guest performers or speakers. We sat together to contribute ideas about what we could write. Children dictated sentences or phrases which I wrote on large sheets of paper in

book spelling with conventional punctuation. When finished, we signed the letter “from Ms. Edwards’s class” and hand delivered it. These “class-dictated letters” were quick and easy to do. What was missing was the children’s own composing of their ideas, their invented spelling, their unique illustrations—the important elements that make letters personal and captivating.

Where the class wrote letters occasionally, individual children made cards frequently. Messages were briefer and easy to copy in standard spelling; the focus of the children’s effort was more on illustrating than on writing. At my request, our art teacher annually taught a unit about card making to my class, demonstrating overlapping flaps, pop open cards, stand up cards, and many styles of art from cutting Victorian details to painting brilliantly colored fish cards. All styles were beautiful and the children’s knowledge of how they might make cards increased. Kids asked to make cards for their parents’ and siblings birthdays, for holidays, and occasionally to mail to a friend or grandparent.

Classroom Mailboxes

In 1992, I directed the 7th Annual University of Massachusetts two-week Summer Writing Camp for Kids, ably assisted by an undergraduate student who had coached writing in my classroom throughout the school year. Camp staff included several other writing coaches who were classroom teachers and university undergraduate students interested in learning about writing with kids. Checking mailboxes and receiving letters were daily features of the Writing Camp’s experiences for kids ages 5 to 14.

First thing Monday morning of both Writing Camp weeks, the campers and coaches wrote their names on 3 1/2” by 6” white envelopes, and tacked them to a wall in alphabetical order. Everyone had a mailbox. When the kids left for the day on Monday afternoons, all of the coaches wrote letters to campers,

dividing the total number between us to assure that each child received mail. As campers arrived on Tuesday morning, we suggested that they go directly to their mailboxes. Each morning thereafter, we did not need to remind anyone to check their mail. As soon as campers arrived they went to their mailboxes expecting to find new messages. Every afternoon the coaches ensured there was mail in every box. Campers wrote to coaches and to other campers whenever they had the chance—before morning meeting, at home in the evenings, after lunch, and when they had a few minutes. Some campers continued to correspond with coaches after the Writing Camp ended for the summer.

Based on the success of the Writing Camp mailboxes for stimulating writing from kids, my assistant at camp and another coach helped me to begin a classroom mail system in Fall 1992. Like the summer campers, the students in the room wanted to receive mail. They were totally surprised and delighted to find something in their mailboxes written by adults or children. Their mailboxes were 3 1/2" by 6" white envelopes with their names on them, taped in rows on a piece of cardboard hung on the bathroom door, a prominent spot with heavy use each day. All children and adults had mailboxes.

Getting and sending mail inspired kids to write replies to the messages they received and to send mail to children and adults who they hoped would send return mail. What I observed was that kids were most excited about mailboxes and most inspired to write if they received quick replies to the letters they sent. The student interns and I wrote to all of the children, regardless of whether or not they had shown any interest in writing to us. This meant long writing sessions after school so that children would have new mail in the envelopes when they arrived the next morning. Writing 24 notes daily was time consuming, even with the endeavor divided between two or three adults. After two weeks we discontinued daily writing and instead wrote once a week.

Electronic mail on computers proved to be a new way to engage children in writing letters. In the Spring preceding the Summer Writing Camp, a school custodian linked our classroom computer with a computer in a sixth grade classroom at the other end of our building, allowing us to write to each other daily before 9 o'clock class meetings. Younger students sent morning messages with questions they were investigating that they thought the older students might answer. The older students typed messages back to us. Everything appeared on the computer screen as it was being typed. Often the children in my class dictated what they wanted to write for adults to type quickly. Sometimes the children typed their own messages in their spelling at a slower pace.

In June 1992, a graduate student joined us to help kids write on computer as part of her study about how youngsters use technology. She assisted children to access the Internet to send messages and to ask questions about information that they wanted to know. She requested that her friends and colleagues write answers and reply to the children. Her use of computer mail invited children to write letters to kids on the opposite side of the globe. My students found this incredibly intriguing. Many checked the electronic bulletin boards and wrote each day. The next year, another intern helped children access the Internet bulletin boards. The same responses occurred. Via the computer, kids wanted to write to other kids whom they had never met and were totally motivated to do so because their keypals lived somewhere far away.

Receiving mail is a powerful motivator for writing public and personal communications. Letter writing was not a mandated daily classroom activity, but when children got mail from adults and friends, they wanted to maintain the correspondence. I would occasionally include letter writing time in our week's schedule, but I also saw the children writing letters by choice during recess, at you choose time, and at home. The adults in the classroom made sure that they

wrote to kids who do not receive many letters from their peers. For some children the more delightful the letters, the more quickly they replied. For others, having time set aside to write letters was a prerequisite for them to write responses.

Connecting Letter Writing with Reading

Children's letters and mailboxes have become a central feature of my language arts curriculum. The bathroom door display of "Local Mail" for our 1995-1996 school year began with large white art paper rectangles folded in half. I showed examples of children's different self-designed mailboxes from past years before asking the new students to create their own mailboxes with markers, crayons and alphabet stickers for their names. When the children had all finished drawing and affixing their names, I asked for volunteers to help me attach sides to the mailboxes. At recess one day, a group of girls put the paper sides on the rectangles, and alphabetized the mailboxes. The boxes were attached to the bathroom door in preparation for the next day's reading of a children's story to introduce letter writing and mail delivery.

I chose a chapter from one of Arnold Lobel's books (1970) about the adventures of two friends, Frog and Toad as my literature opener. In *The Letter*, Toad is unhappy about never receiving mail. Frog attempts to cheer up his friend by writing him a letter. Frog gives the letter to the mail carrier, Snail, and goes to Toad's house to await the surprising delivery with his friend. By the time the letter arrives four days later, Frog has already divulged his surprise and the letter's contents to Toad. This does not alter Toad's joy at receiving mail or Frog's excitement about seeing the delivery of his letter.

After an intern read the story aloud to small groups of kids, they discussed how they would feel if they never had any mail in their mailboxes. Their responses were the same, "Sad." Then each child wrote one letter to another

child in the class. After everyone had heard *The Letter* and composed a letter to someone else, children hand-delivered their letters to the mailboxes. In addition to the child-written letters, I asked two college students who were tutoring in the classroom to use multi-colored ink pads with stamps to create faces on small postcards for each child. I added word stamps so that the characters created from the face stamps could all say something—"Great!" "Hi!" "Bravo!" or "Good for You!" These postcards were to be my first mail of the year to the kids.

However, my cards and kids' letters were ready to be mailed on the day that I would be out of the classroom with a substitute teacher in charge. The last time that this teacher substituted, some of the kids decided they did not like being with her. Knowing how much kids like to get mail, and how excited they were to see their mailboxes displayed, I gave the already made postcards to her so she could write a message on each one and put them in the mailboxes. Here was a way to help an adult form a relationship with children that I had not thought of before! They like to get mail from me, I reasoned, so they might equally enjoy getting mail from her.

This was the first time that I had introduced letter writing with a literature opener, ink stamp messages, and the assurance that each child would have two pieces of mail. Previously, I had not included letter writing as part of the ongoing language arts curriculum. I now realized that children will write more letters when they see a range of possibilities available to them. Children's books about letters, how the U. S. Postal System works, and stories told through letters provide models and information for young writers to use in composing their own correspondence. Literature openers demonstrate how authors use letters in stories, include acrostic poems and drawings, and create cartoons that talk. Publishing letters on the computer also attracts kids to writing them.

Mouse Letters by Michelle Cartlidge (1993) is a much loved book in our room because it is so small, 4" X 4." On each page is a tiny envelope holding an even tinier letter, 1 1/4" X 2." Each letter gives a clue about where a present from the mouse fairies is hidden at the end of the story. Even the most beginning readers want to read these little letters, despite their teeny, tiny print. After one group of kids had heard this story I received a very small letter (2 1/4" X 2") in my mailbox from one of the girls, a beginning reader herself. Inside she had stapled a pop out bear, 1 3/4" tall. Her message was written in letters 1/8" high. I had never received any child-made letter this small before.

My ideas about how to inspire children to write public and personal communications include two important strategies. First, featuring children's literature as openers for kids own writing allows me to introduce new ways to explore similar themes. With so many different books about letters, there is always something new to try when children's interest in writing wanes. Second, watching what children do with their writing when given the freedom to choose what they want to do is a source of inspiration that is always surprising, never predictable, and most impressive to other youngsters. Children are inspired as much by other children's writing as they are by adult writing. Adding poetry, jokes, riddles, illustrations, or small gifts in letters are reading and writing activities that children enjoy doing and receiving.

Child choice provides a context that is authentic for the letter writer and for the letter reader. There is a reason to focus on and to practice mastering conventions that help people to read their mail. Forming letters carefully, including punctuation marks, and leaving spaces between words are important conventions of print that children need to learn how to use. Youngsters do not have to copy the entire letter till it is perfect, adding tedium to the experience. I have devised many simple and quick ways to help kids make changes—using

white out and correction tape; cutting up a paper to insert something and then gluing everything together on another sheet of paper; or copying a letter on the office copier to send it to more than one person.

Children's letters are interesting because there is no one correct format for writing them as I have learned by watching kids create them over the past four years. There are endless ways to compose letters, with many choices to consider from size of paper to type of pencil or colored writing utensil. There are also many possible things to include in the text—poems, drawings, puzzles, maps, cartoons, riddles. These factors make it easy to emphasize letter writing and other forms of public and personal communication as year long activities in the language arts curriculum.

The Before Noon News

Shortly after receiving the first Good Neighbor Award from the State Farm Insurance Companies and the National Council of Teachers of English in 1990, I was invited to do a presentation on children's writing and classroom uses of newspapers for reading teachers in the Newport News, Virginia area (Edwards & Maloy, 1991). The presentation went well, judging by the questions and comments from the audience, and it inspired me to rethink key aspects of my teaching strategies. Writing Boxes had given new momentum to children's writing at home and in school. Now I needed a way to use this momentum to sustain writing in the classroom while also integrating children's news and adult newspapers more fully into the curriculum.

What emerged was a new teaching strategy that I called "The Before Noon News"—a daily meeting of children and adults in the classroom held shortly before lunch where everyone hears reports of local and national news, the weather, the school lunch menu and other information. Over time, the Before

Noon News became a powerful writing and publishing occasion, a way to use the daily newspaper with elementary school students, and a new approach to early grades social studies education. It is a learning forum taught by children, an opportunity for them to practice reading and writing, and an authentic occasion for group cooperation.

Weather and News

The Before Noon News was an incomplete idea when I first announced it to the children in my class. I needed a way to publish the public writing that kids did every day during snack time—the weather, the lunch menus, and the science experiments they were doing at school or learning about at home. Because of the writing involved in each of these activities, the idea of a broadcast format came to mind. In the beginning I had no idea that it would provide a learning time almost totally directed by the children. Gradually, the Before Noon News grew into one of the most important daily classroom events because of the writing that it featured and because the children learned how to run it almost independently.

We used the weather pages of *USA TODAY* and *The Boston Globe* as the sources of our daily weather reports. *The Boston Globe* tells the amount of daylight we receive each day, making it possible to chart how the length of days shorten in fall and winter and increase in spring and summer. *USA TODAY's* map displays the temperatures of the United States in a color code, counting by tens, that clearly contrasts the cold of Alaska with the warmth of Hawaii.

The daily weather is written by two children together, usually on two sheets of paper, but occasionally on the same paper. Each chooses between three and six cities and circles them on the map. Then they write down the names and the temperatures (see Figure 4.5). Favorite spots reported almost every day are Puerto Rico, Cuba, Hawaii, Florida, Alaska, Mexico City, International Falls,

Hartford (because the temperature is similar to Amherst's), and Helena, Montana during the year one of our students was named Helena. Occasionally someone reports the temperature of a country or a city that is not on the map. Then we look at the world map so kids can locate Paris, London, Hong Kong or Moscow.

Very cold places and very hot places attract the attention of the class. After I showed children where the extreme high and low daily temperatures were listed in *USA TODAY*, the weather reporters read these as part of their daily report. In *The Boston Globe* they find the length of day and write it on a chart on the chalkboard so they can compute how many minutes of daylight we are losing or gaining as the seasons change. I incorporated all this weather information into our science study of Earth Changes.

In the first half of the year kids write only city names; state names are not on the *USA TODAY* map. In the second half of the year I put a United States puzzle next to the weather map so kids can record city and state names, in standard spellings with conventional use of upper and lower case letters.

The children themselves provide local news, writing about themselves, the garden outside our room and things that they do at home. With the daily newspapers as references for reporting national and international news, and the children reporting local news, we talk about the differences between all of these kinds of news. Occasionally, children cut photos out of newspapers at home to use on our daily news broadcasts.

During the 1995-96 school year, children began reading nature facts they found in books on the news. Kids read their stories and poems, demonstrated science and mathematics projects, and presented what they had learned in their "I Wonder" journals. Because the garden outside our room is filled with interesting natural life—insects, flowers, weeds which burst and drop their seeds—kids who think they have nothing to report walk out the back door and have information

to share with the class that day. The science and health section in the Monday edition of *The Boston Globe* also provides specific information about science and nature, including a nature cartoon.

Throughout the years before writing began to influence the classroom routine and curriculum, I attempted to teach accurately the history of the public holidays that we observed. Our class celebration of Thanksgiving evolved into an exploration of the foods that indigenous peoples of the Americas cultivated, traded, and gave to the world. I highlighted the celebrations of Hanukkah and Passover with Christmas and Easter, linking the histories of the two religions as the remembrances of miracles. The children and I discussed the birthdays of Martin Luther King Jr., George Washington and Abraham Lincoln as well as the lives of Rosa Parks and George Washington Carver. But prior to the Before Noon News, I had focused little attention or class time on current events and did not regularly bring newspapers to school.

Till I began reading *USA TODAY* and *The Boston Globe* daily, I was unaware of how much historical and scientific information they provide for all of the curriculum, and the interesting news they enable children to report to the class. The latest dinosaur finds, Egyptian pyramid discoveries, the news about the origins of the planet and the size of the universe, the deaths of important people in the 20th century, the anniversaries of significant events in history, photos and coverage of the first vote for Black citizens of South Africa are all stories that every student should but does not know about. Now with The Before Noon News some of this important information is broadcast daily.

Menus

Writing and publishing the daily school lunch menu had never been part of the classroom routine before the Writing Boxes. There had seemed no reason

to consider menus in any academic context besides nutrition and the study of health. The week's menu appeared in plain view on the kitchen wall for all to see as they walked into the cafeteria and was published for family reference in the weekly news from school.

Shortly after the Writing Boxes went home the first year, seeking ways to increase kids' public writing in the classroom, one day I asked someone to write the lunch menu and read it aloud to everyone before we washed for lunch. The following day I asked another child and the next day another, till almost everyone had written and read the menu aloud once. Some of the kids were willing to write the menu twice and some wanted to have a third turn, but not everyone. One boy refused my request, saying simply, "No, I don't want to." So I asked his friend, who queried, "Do I have to do it alone?"

"No," I replied as if I had known he would ask me that very question. "You can ask a friend to write it with you," which is what he did. The boy who had initially rejected my suggestion was now eager to write with his friend.

As they gathered pencils and paper I realized that with two kids writing we had an opportunity to try something new, something never done before. I went to them and whispered, "If two of you are doing the menu, one can write the real menu and the other can write a fake menu." They looked at me with no obvious response in their expressions for two seconds before looking at each other, grinning and replying, "Yeah!"

"That means one of you has to think of another menu that sounds like it might be real but isn't," I explained. "Then when you read them out loud, the kids will have to guess which one is real." Now the grins were even bigger and their excitement was obvious. "Yeah!" they said again.

We consulted briefly about what the real menu was and what a second, not real menu might be. I left them writing, not realizing that I had just created, by

saying yes instead of no, what would become one of the most popular public writing events in our room. No one knew that menus would evolve into so much fun that few kids would ever protest about writing them. The Writing Box had begun to teach me that successful daily writing involved my willingness to be innovative, to be willing to add play, excitement, and fun to writing. I had no idea how innovative the kids could be once that formula for writing success was in place!

Each year a new class has done something that no class before did and no class since has thought of doing with their written menus. The second year, a child wrote the words that he knew how to spell in book spelling—yes, no, yes, no—at the end of his menu and read them as part of the menu. When the other kids heard this they began elaborating on his idea, writing these two words repeatedly and reading them aloud at the end of their menus. Then someone wrote a knock knock joke, so other kids added knock knocks and other jokes to their menus. Thereafter the menus included all kinds of jokes.

During the fourth year of the Writing Box project, the children began writing menus that could not possibly be real. After hearing these fantastic, slightly gross, funny creations, other kids in the class would respond by saying, “Ugh! I lost my appetite!” One day, as the last funny menu was read, I said, “That’s the punch line!” After the kids found out what this meant, they started using the phrase to describe the funny menu they had written. The punch line vocabulary carried over from the fourth to the fifth year and kids began waiting to read their menus last, announcing to the other menu writers, “No, you have to read yours first. Mine’s the punch line!”

The fifth year kids wrote and read their menus together in unison in pairs, trios, quartets, and quintets. Sometimes these were fake; sometimes real. As I incorporated these new words into our daily vocabulary, children began using

the words to describe how many were reading together. In the seventh year they started to write the menu in an acrostic poem format. In the eighth year they started to write scripts for short plays and act out the menu, as well as to read menus like a poem in two voices—one child saying part of the menu, the other child responding and saying another part.

The variety of ways to write menus appears to be infinite, which is one of the most interesting aspects of menu writing. The children watch each other to get new ideas. If children do not see examples of what kids did the year before, like the jokes in the menu, they might never think of doing it. Now I suggest all kinds of different things, like menus written in a comic book format, ideas that I would never have thought of had I not seen what unusual, engaging writing kids will do with a small suggestion from me.

Before beginning the Writing Box project I never thought of discussing the characteristics of fiction and nonfiction with five, six, and seven year olds. I read fiction aloud but referred to it as stories. I did not read aloud nonfiction nor question my reasons for this practice. Shortly after the first Writing Boxes went home, one of the five year olds inquired about the dinosaur books on display in our room. "How do you know which ones are real and which ones are fake?" he asked me.

As I considered how to explain the differences between the books, I better understood the complexity of the issue. The children's writing provided me with ways to illustrate the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction genres. We talked about how much of a story really happened and how much of it had been made up. One morning in December of that first Writing Box year, Clayton walked into our room and announced to me, "I wrote fiction and nonfiction. It's the first time I ever wrote nonfiction."

One month later, Margarida and I were listening to Eugenie read the story she wrote at home. Margarida asked her, "Is this fiction or nonfiction?"

"Well, it's mostly nonfiction with a little fiction," replied Eugenie.

Using fiction and nonfiction in stories and menus offered children choices to consider in their authoring. Did they want to write fiction or nonfiction? If they chose fiction, did they want to try to fool the audience by composing a menu that sounded real or did they want the audience to know immediately that they were using their imaginations?

Some of the children's menus were wildly fantastic and designed to elicit groans of delight from the audience (see Figure 4.6). Others were plausible alternatives to the actual lunches (see Figure 4.7). After they heard the menus, the children had to determine which ones they thought were real and which ones they thought were make believe. Voting on the verity of the menus quickly became a rousing and boisterous activity with the class fully engaged in trying to determine truth from fiction.

I was surprised first by how widely varied menu writing became and second by its permanent ability to engage audiences of kids. Day after day throughout that first year, no one grew tired of the activity. Each year since, groups of children have eagerly sought to "fool" or "gross out" the audience. A third surprising aspect of this activity is how much learning springs from what might appear at first to be nonessential, frivolous writing.

Poetry

As a child, my school and home experiences did not impart an affection for poetry; luckily my browsing in the library and the bookmobile provided me with joyful reading of poetic verse. As a young teacher, I did not want to repeat the joyless, uninteresting experiences with poetry that I remembered from classrooms.

Recalling that I wrote poetry first in fourth grade, I assumed that first and second grade children were too young to write poems. During my first year of teaching, afraid to do anything that would make my students dislike poetry, I did not even read it aloud in class. In the summer before my second year of teaching, I found two important books—a 600 page anthology entitled *Favorite Poems Old and New* (Ferris, 1957), and Albert Cullum's, *Push Back The Desks* (1967). These books directed and sustained my poetry teaching through the next 15 years.

Push Back The Desks describes many of Cullum's unusual teaching strategies—deliberately designed to inspire children's learning in all curriculum areas by exciting their sense of wonder, humor and curiosity. To animate poetry in a way that would invite kids to hear and read poems repeatedly, he created a classroom ritual called "Magic Poetry Pot." Before reading poetry aloud, he darkened the classroom, brought out a cast iron pot to put in the middle of the floor, and lit a stick of incense in it creating a thin plume of smoke wafting toward the ceiling. The class then sat in a circle on the floor around the Magic Poetry Pot.

With this mood of mystery and drama as the setting, Cullum read poetry as it might be read in the theater, in a fashion that rose hair on the backs of necks and made kids laugh delightedly. Volume, speed, and accent were elements that created these dramatic effects. Theatrics were important to enjoyment and enjoyment was his first goal. Cullum and his students did not dwell on the meaning of the poet's images nor did they focus their efforts on dissecting the meter and naming the form. Instead they experienced a rollicking, unusual, enjoyable moment with poetry that instilled interest in the genre and invited students to find their own favorite poems to read at Magic Poetry Pot. His teaching technique pulled kids to poetry and once there, building on their interest

and their excitement, Cullum then discussed vocabulary, tempo, rhyme, no rhyme, the structure of the poetry, and the lives of the poets.

I purchased a cast iron caldron and some incense, turned out the lights, and read poetry to the kids. This became one of the most looked-forward-to rituals in my class. At the end of each reading, I asked kids to close their eyes and hold out their hands to receive a gift from the Magic Poetry Pot. The treat might be a cookie, a new pencil or a stick of gum but always the reading of poetry was associated with some surprise that pleased kids. My students did the same thing that Cullum's did with this activity. They read poetry that they wanted to include in the Magic Poetry Pot readings. Their experiences were filled with the charm of the unusual, the moods of drama and comedy, and the joy of poems.

While the success of Magic Poetry Pot demonstrated a way to create affection for and excitement about poetry, it did not address how children might write poetry themselves. Reading poetry to youngsters added to my conviction that poetic structure was too sophisticated for youngsters to write. Most everything I read aloud rhymed; rhyming was difficult even for adults to compose! I assumed that reading poetry from a children's collection in an inspired way was the best method to help children to learn about poetry. I did not write poems and did not ask the children to write them.

I found Kenneth Koch's *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* (1970) before my third year of teaching. Koch, a poet and a teacher of poetry writing, was amazed by children's ways of expressing their feelings and their ideas poetically. He described how he began writing poetry with youngsters, and illustrated the ideas he tried with them by publishing some of the poems in the back of his book for readers to see. He celebrated a way of writing poetry with kids that was easy and the outcome appeared delightful. An answer to how I might ask children to write poetry was now in my possession.

So I asked my students to write using two of Koch's ideas, "I Used to Be" and "I Wish" poems. They did, with enjoyment and thought, and were proud of their efforts. Everyone wrote except me, and the students appeared to enjoy the opportunity to create poems and to hear each others. I continued to use Koch's ideas for poetry writing with kids two or three times a year. And I continued to use Magic Poetry Pot two or three times a season. My activities with poetry remained between the covers of Cullum, Koch and a few volumes of collected poems for children for 15 years.

Even as I searched for new poems for Magic Poetry Pot, most of the poetry I found in the library had common features that reinforced my belief that young kids should not be asked to write much poetry because of the inherent complexity of its structure. Popular children's poetry rhymed; haiku lines had to match syllable counts; cinquains used synonyms to describe a central theme. None of these forms appeared easy for six, seven, and eight year old children to compose independently. Friends of mine teaching nine, ten, and eleven year olds were asking them to write poetry, and that seemed more appropriate for those older students.

From Koch and Cullum I learned that an expression of fun or feelings touched by words were key to children's experiences with poetry. Through enjoyment they had the confidence to express their own thoughts and ideas; they acquired appreciation of language as an expressive form to play with words and create humor; they developed an interest in hearing poetry and conversing about why they liked it. But then I had no experience with what might happen when young writers wrote poetry without any preconceptions of mine preventing them from expressing themselves in many different ways.

Poetry writing by children had been curtailed by my beliefs about what kids could and could not do, and what experiences were crucial or not to their

learning. I did not understand how the power of ideas from the inside—thoughts and questions from a child’s inner wonderings and reflections—possessed a power of involvement with reading and writing that nothing else could create in equal strength. My views began to change dramatically as I saw how multiple forms of poetry could serve as ways for children to creatively express their ideas and feelings through written language.

Acrostic Poetry

A new definition of writing entered the classroom with the first Writing Boxes and expanded as I experienced surprise, delight and joy watching how youngsters as writers expressed the ideas and pictures in their heads. With the right writing experiences, it appeared that every child had words to say and to write that communicated something from the inside out—what each wanted to share with an audience. When this new definition of writing was applied to poetry, instead of writing poetry occasionally, kids began writing poetry regularly.

Acrostics were our first poetry writing genre. It is a form that I had never used previously as it seemed contrived and not “real” poetry. An acrostic is a poem where the letters of one or more words are written vertically down the side of the page. Each letter is used as part of a line of a poem that is written horizontally across the page. For example, two children and their college writing partners used the word “wind” to make the following acrostic:

What

In the world is that

Noise

Downstairs?

Sometimes an acrostic poem describes the originating word(s), but not always. At other times, the poem is unconnected to the word(s) from which the poem is constructed.

An undergraduate student engaged in an independent study about children's writing introduced acrostic poetry to my class. She was creating these poems in her college writing class and found them exciting and interesting. Her enthusiasm for the poems demonstrated to me how a successful introduction to a writing genre is key to children's response and writing. Every child wanted to write an acrostic after she read her own acrostic poems aloud and we guessed the words hidden in the verse.

As the first acrostics were being written, it occurred to me that one of the delightful aspects of these poems was that no one but the poet knew the word(s) used to construct it. Thus began the ritual of reading acrostic poems aloud in our classroom. First, the poet reads the entire poem for our appreciation. Then, the poet reads line by line, pausing at each line break so another child can write on the chalkboard the first letter of the line just read. Letter by letter, line by line, the word emerges, to the delight of the audience.

The aura of suspense created as the letters appear, and the power of kids' concentration as they attempt to guess the word before it is entirely revealed rivet everyone's attention. Each year children have enjoyed acrostic poems because of their aspect of mystery. I have enjoyed the acrostic form because it encouraged me to write my first poems. Why do children as well as parents and teachers in writing workshops that Robert Maloy and I conduct for school districts around the country write acrostics so enthusiastically? There are two reasons—one, the ritual of how we read the lines to reveal the word inside, and two, the experience of successfully writing a poem that surprises the audience with its eloquence, humor, sensitivity or beautiful language. For many adults in

our workshop, acrostics are the first poems they have written and enjoyed writing.

Acrostic poetry is infinitely surprising. In Figure 4.8, a young girl has created a unique birthday message to send to the Civil Rights pioneer Rosa Parks on her 80th birthday. In Figure 4.9, a young boy uses humor and surprise in his "I Love You" acrostic. The more that I write these poems with kids and adults, the more impressed I am by their power to express ideas in surprising ways. Audiences want to hear each of the poems read aloud two or three times in order to savor their images. Acrostics surprise poets and readers with their expressive power and the ease with which they are composed. The results are thrilling for many who never thought they could or would be poets.

An acrostic poem can be enjoyed in more than one way: It can be heard aloud without the audience knowing that a word is concealed in the poem; it can be viewed and enjoyed as a word picture formed by the arrangement of the letters on the page; it can describe a scene, image or idea associated with the word used to construct the poem. Acrostics may be read silently, read aloud, or viewed as a picture. All of these possibilities offer different experiences to a reader, listener or viewer.

Delight with the mystery of acrostics prompted kids to write them at home to publish on the Before Noon News and to include them in letters they wrote to each other. Acrostics grew so popular that each day four or five poets were reading them aloud to the class. Being the child chosen to record the initial letters of each line on the chalkboard became a desired job. The class kept a list of how many times each child had been a recorder to ensure everyone's having equal numbers of turns.

One day in Spring 1994, I thought of a new way to publish four acrostic poems that children had written as home practice the night before. For the first

time, I paired Magic Poetry Pot with a read aloud of kids' acrostics. I deliberately did not announce each poet's name till the word structuring the poem had been recorded on the chalkboard and the class guessed who the poet might be. TRUCK was obviously William's poem; everyone knew he loved vehicles. The four poets and the audience were greatly excited by this novel publishing strategy. Other kids wanted to be the next poets to have their acrostics read anonymously at Magic Poetry Pot. This format prompted more children to write acrostic poetry at home to publish at school.

As children and I began reading more acrostics daily, I stopped incorporating the Magic Poetry Pot because that celebration took more time than publishing the poems on the Before Noon News or at lunch as we ate together. At the same time, I began to read more poetry spontaneously during the day. I bought many poetry books, found poems to read across the curriculum, and requested that children write poetry regularly in school and as home practice.

Poems in Two Voices

Youngsters' success writing acrostic poems indicated to me that they could write other poetic forms if my presentation of new ideas were inviting and exciting to every child. In Fall 1995, while we were observing insects as part of our science unit, "Change and Development," I asked our school librarian to read aloud with me a "two voice poem." Paul Fleischman's *Joyful Noise: Poems In Two Voices* (1988) are written as conversations between insects for two people or two groups to read together. Although Fleischman expected the poems to be read with some lines simultaneously in two voices and others singularly in one voice, his method necessitates a rehearsal by the two readers. Since we did not have the time to rehearse, I suggested that we read the simultaneous lines

singularly with one voice echoing the other. This allowed us to read the poems with an echo in our combination of two voices.

I chose "House Crickets" because I thought that the echo voice would be especially entertaining where the crickets repeat the word "cricket" "cricket" throughout the poem. The librarian and I read our refrains in theatric voicing, much to the astonishment of the audience and our unrehearsed selves. I was stunned by the success of our first reading. One of the students I would not have predicted would ask, immediately at the end of our reading requested that we read the poem again. If a child requests a second hearing, the selection has been compelling. I was surprised by the attentiveness of the youngsters and very grateful that I had found a way to express these poems that enabled children to enjoy and participate in the reading by chanting "cricket" along with us.

The following Monday, Leah brought a poem in two voices that she had written at home over the weekend (see Figure 4.10). When I saw hers, I knew that the other children could write these poems, too. She and I read hers together on the Before Noon News. It received the same enthusiastic applause as had Paul Fleischman's poem. I decided that the next step before asking kids to write a two voice poem was to compose my own. I wrote one inspired by a memory from my childhood and asked Leah to read it aloud with me on the News the following day.

My poem gave her an idea that she used a day later to compose another poem with another child in the class during the bus ride to school. When they arrived at school they told me that they had memorized their two voice poem so I asked them to write their verse during morning snack. Theirs was a two voice news report that they aired on the News that day. A few weeks later these two girls wrote a two voice weather report for the day's broadcast.

Because of the enjoyment that the class had experienced writing two voice poems, I decided to introduce them to our college writing partners from one of the University's first-year English courses. The university students joined the children in my class six times to write different genres together during the Fall 1995 and Spring 1996 semesters. Younger and older students wrote poetry together twice. At our first meeting in September we wrote acrostics. At our third meeting in October, we wrote two and three voice poems. None of the college writers had ever tried writing multiple voice poetry before.

Partner and group collaboration among the children appeared to be the key to younger and older students successfully composing two voice poems. Older writers followed the lead of children, and most of the children incorporated the older writers' ideas, making collaboration central to the voicing of the poems. No one person was totally responsible for the outcome. After 20 minutes, when pairs and groups of adults and kids read their poems aloud, everyone appeared impressed with the results. The younger kids were really proud of what they had composed with the ideas and assistance of the college writers.

What neither younger nor older writers realized was that this had been a successful practice for everyone, making it easier for students in both classes to try writing these poems again. From then, writing in multiple voices appeared not only easy but fun to many kids who incorporated this voicing into the writing of lunch menus. The youngsters who had first written the two voiced news report on the bus also wrote the first two voiced lunch menu. After hearing theirs, other kids tried this, too.

Haiku Poetry

I had taught Haiku to youngsters only once or twice before the Writing Box project. Measuring the complex characteristics of its form against the

satisfaction gained from accurately composing a classic haiku, I did not see a workable instructional balance. After writing one haiku, most youngsters did not write another. They did not see any reason to use this form to play with words or images. With its precise characteristics—meter measured by five syllables in the first line, seven in the second line, and five in the third line; setting established by mention of the season or time of day; and description focused on one particular event in nature—many children found the rules of haiku confining rather than interesting parts of a puzzle to solve with words.

I found a new way to introduce haiku in a children's collection of Japanese Haiku by the famous poet, Issa (Merrill & Solbert, 1969). Although published nearly two decades ago, this book was new to me, and it became a treasured find. Editor Jean Merrill (1969, p. 7) recalls another Japanese poet's definition of haiku as a "one-breath poem." The poet "uses only as many words as can be easily spoken in one breath." This explanation revealed a way to begin writing haiku with children that differed from the ancient and exact Japanese method, but retained its meaning and intent. I decided that we would try writing about the ideas and pictures in our heads to create "a poem in one breath." Thus I introduced haiku poetry to the children with excitement and with confidence that we could write our own haiku and enjoy doing so.

I read several poems aloud from Jean Merrill's book and other collections of haiku for children in early October. Then I explained that haiku are short, can be read aloud in one breath, and that their words describe something to make a picture in people's minds. When we wrote, everyone did a haiku in less than seven minutes and we read them aloud to the class. Each child read his/her poem twice—initially for us to listen to and again for us to close our eyes to see the picture the words created. After everyone read, I reminded the writers of the characteristics of haiku poetry and I read a few more. The kids seemed very

comfortable with the explanation and the poems. Some of them immediately chose haiku books to take and read with a friend.

Here are three haiku written at home by one of the students in my class presented in his invented spelling followed by standard spelling:

litle Hawk litle Hawk why do you glid insted of soring?

(Little hawk, little hawk, why do you glide instead of soaring?)

Days go bye like the wind and so do you

(Days go by like the wind and so do you.)

Hit the Ball It's A Home run yay ses the crowd

(Hit the ball. It's a home run! Yea, says the crowd!)

Thanks to Ms. Merrill's explanation of haiku, its creative form became accessible through "a writing process fit for a child." Here was a new and exciting way to introduce haiku poetry. Whether or not every child understood what syllables were and how to count them was not most important. Description of a particular event in a concise yet pictorial way was the goal. The children's responses were confident and relaxed. They composed "poems in one breath" regularly throughout the year. When we discussed haiku poetry again in the second half of the year, and wrote some with the college students at our final writing time in May, children's knowledge of describing words had increased. They had practiced writing in this genre through the semester, and the haiku that the older and younger writers penned were detailed pictures in words.

Children's poetry writing has been connected with another recent curriculum change in the classroom—my focus on "teaching conventions of

written language unconventionally.” This past school year I have collected poems that include specific sound or spelling patterns to use as openers for teaching language study concepts. For example, a poem repeating the words “walk” and “talk” includes the silent “L” in the spelling pattern of a few rhyming words (“chalk” and “stalk”). There are tens of others like this one that lead to an examination of spelling and rhyming words after the poems are read, heard and played with by groups of students.

Some poetry also illustrates how and why writers create paragraphs. My favorite opener for this study is the title poem of Eloise Greenfield’s anthology, *Honey I Love and Other Love Poems* (1986). Each stanza describes one person or event in detail that explains the poet’s love for a particular person or thing. The stanzas are separated by their descriptions and by their placement on the page, making it easier for children to see and to understand what paragraphing does for a writer and reader.

My growing acquaintance with and affection for teaching language through poetry has evolved into many curriculum areas, including mathematics and science. The wide range of possibilities has barely opened in our daily curriculum activities but my ideas are constantly inspired by the poetry that we read together and that we compose. Ways to explore poetry appear as endless as the ways to write poetic forms of acrostics, haiku, two-voice, or rhymed and unrhymed verse.

Fiction and Nonfiction Stories

As a new teacher fresh from college, I had limited knowledge of famous children’s authors. I did not know how to use fiction or nonfiction in teaching language arts; how to organize a classroom library; or how to utilize a selection of children’s books as a teaching-learning center. I did not realize the importance of

either daily read alouds or children's story writing as part of language arts instruction for youngsters.

The library resources in the school where I did my first year of teaching were more extensive than anything I had experienced as a public school student. The library, open all day every day, became a source of books for my individualized reading program. Unsure about how to teach reading and writing or where to go for help and ideas, I also made weekly forays to the largest public library nearby my home. I read entire shelves in the fiction section during each visit till I had finished reading all of the titles. Each week I took a box of books to my classroom to read aloud and to have for the children to read.

Reading aloud became one of the most useful and satisfying parts of my teaching day. All of the children were attentive and seemed to enjoy hearing stories. I used the books to teach new vocabulary words to the class. Through daily read alouds, I grew familiar with writers who were icons in children's literature—Leo Lionni, Bill Peet and Dr. Seuss, to name a few. When I found picture books with challenging vocabulary and interesting stories, I read others by that same author, providing modest author studies for our class.

After a while, I had acquired enough knowledge to begin to compare illustrations and texts between authors as part of my language arts curriculum. Comparisons and contrasts enlivened my teaching and heightened student excitement about books. Two decades later, as part of my research about writing with children, I read Jim Trelease's *New Read Aloud Handbook* (1989) and realized how important the daily read alouds had been for learning. The language and rhyming structures, the development of the story, and the conversation of the characters all modeled the finest examples of written language for children to hear and recall. These stories increased the children's knowledge and ideas for writing their own stories.

Although I was reading aloud daily, I was not asking children to write fiction and nonfiction on a regular basis and I never asked them to write from their own ideas. When I did ask the children to write fiction, I usually assigned story starters for them to choose from—beginning sentences or phrases, a file of pictures to write about, or a theme for all of the children to use during the writing period. I did not ask children to write about their lives or experiences. I praised their efforts and ideas and displayed their writing inside and outside our classroom.

When they wrote I asked all of the students to use their own language, syntax and spelling. I did not correct their stories, but read or listened to the children read them aloud to the class. I did not assign writing as a home activity and do not recall any student bringing in a story written at home. I did not realize that children could and would identify their own topics for exciting, surprising writing. My assumptions about writing restricted what children did and blocked what they might have done with different assistance from me. My prior experiences with and knowledge about composing stories, oral and written, were insufficient to lead children from their expertise in oral storytelling to their next creative strength, fiction and nonfiction story writing.

Imaginative Story Writing

For more than 20 years, my strategies for teaching creative writing to young children came from ideas adapted from *Instructor* magazine. One writing format was called “line on the paper stories.” I drew a line—straight, wavy, pointed, curvy, short, long, sometimes overlapping itself—in different colors on sheets of white drawing paper. Each child chose a piece of paper and drew a picture that incorporated the line into their drawing. The drawings inspired their stories. Occasionally I repeated the same line on two papers at the request of two

children. They drew their pictures separately and then compared the results. We marveled at the different pictures and stories that emerged from the same shaped lines. The students enjoyed line design story writing year after year.

After seeing the success of line designs, I created "hole in the paper stories." I cut a different shaped hole on each paper and kids incorporated holes into their pictures. A new writing opportunity emerged from having the same hole on both sides of the paper. Now children could make two illustrations and choose which to write about. Many of the children chose to write about only one illustration on their paper. But one youngster who drew a telephone receiver on one side and a banana on the other side of her paper confidently and quickly wrote two stories, thoroughly surprising me. Although it was the first time that she had used this idea for writing, she was self-assured and pleased with her efforts.

At that time I did not understand what made these line designs and hole in the paper writing so successful. I realize now that they were different from the other writing activities I usually assigned:

First, drawing is something most kids felt confident doing. No one said, "I can't draw," whereas some might have said, "I can't write," if given a blank paper and a request to write a story.

Second, the process of drawing was a rehearsal for writing. As children drew, they associated their words with their pictures, creating a story in their minds from their own ideas. They talked with each other, collaborating their ideas while they were illustrating.

Third, because the story used their ideas, not an adult story starter or writing prompt, the children's investment in the outcome was higher.

Fourth, these were no-fail activities without a right or wrong way to do them. Whatever children did, I accepted.

Finally, their stories were always published because I displayed and read them aloud.

Interestingly, other writing strategies that I tried did not receive the same positive response from the children. One of these, called a "three word story," seemed to have some of the characteristics of line designs and hole in the paper writing but when I assigned it, few children welcomed or utilized it. I chose three words—for instance, cat, mouse, cake—and a child would compose a story that included them.

Many children found this assignment unsatisfying. Almost always the stories were short, less interesting, and not important to the writer. I thought one factor impeding success might be that I chose the three words, so I asked children to choose one, two, or three of the words. Even then the stories were not as surprising or easy for the children to write as were the line designs and holes in the paper pictures.

I did not try three word stories often because the results always seemed to be dull and unimaginative. I did not see the possibilities of linking this strategy to children's literature, where three very different things or characters might create an interesting story, or of giving three words to a group of children so they might collaborate together to compose a story or a play. I can see now how to use the idea in a more interesting way that children might wish to try again on their own.

Three conclusions are apparent from my using line designs, holes in the paper, and three word stories to stimulate children's writing:

First, when adults chose the story starters, children did not develop topics from their own experiences and ideas.

Second, children's response to a writing activity is different depending on whether or not they are asked to write spontaneously from their own

imagination. The more an adult creates the framework for the writing, the less invested the children seem to be in the activity and its outcomes.

Third, writing that was not integral to a child's personal experiences seemed to be much less interesting and imaginative. Children were more involved in writing about topics where their choices and their imagination created a broader realm for playing with words in ways that were personally meaningful to these young writers.

Stories from Home

In Fall of the 1986-87 school year, at my invitation, the school district's writing resource teacher joined my classroom once a week to explore ways to teach writing as a process, using a whole language methodology. We discarded strategies I had used since I was a beginning teacher and asked children to write from their own imaginations. Topics were not assigned by the teacher; child choice and self-direction were the preferred approach to writing. Other parts of a whole language model were also introduced including writing conferences between adults and children, multiple drafts of stories, and books composed by the students, published with cardboard covers.

Again in 1987-88, I requested the coach's assistance in continuing a process approach to writing with children. The children's enthusiasm made writing a favorite part of the daily curriculum. However, each year youngsters with the greatest knowledge of letter sounds, or who confidently used their own spelling, or who had many stories to tell, displayed an ease with writing personal narrative and occasional fiction that some others in the class did not demonstrate.

As many as a third of the class continued a pattern that was in place before the writing coach joined my classroom—they were not successful in developing their oral or written stories or enlarging their knowledge of the conventions of

writing. Those children did not write as much as they illustrated or questioned adults about what to write. I did not consider writing collaboratively with kids, nor did I take dictation of their stories as I had done for some children in past years, because the writing coach did not model either strategy.

When the first class of children took home Writing Boxes in November 1988, the writing patterns changed dramatically for the youngsters who were writing easily as well as for most of those who were not. New personal writing materials supplemented by parental support provided the circumstances to foster writing at home. Children could choose whether to author fiction or nonfiction and which materials to use when they wrote. Every time adults suggested "Why don't you write?" either at home or at school, the designation of youngsters being writers right now was reinforced.

Two children, a girl and a boy, who had been writing less than everyone else, became the most prolific story writers in the class after receiving their Writing Boxes. The encouragement of their families, the proximity of materials, and the choice of what to write were factors in the transformation of these two young writers who had avoided paper and pencil activities till this time. The boy wrote at home every day for months and brought his stories to school to read aloud to the class daily. He was so proud of his efforts and his achievements that he told people he loved to write and wanted to be the boy who wrote the most stories in the world. He wrote about things that happened at home to his siblings and about Monster Trucks, a topic of great interest to him.

Before she had a Writing Box, the girl had not picked up a pencil to do any form of written or pictorial communication. She did not like her drawings and her letter formation was weak. The day after bringing her Writing Box home, she constructed an office in her living room on a little plastic table with some of her favorite toys and her Box. At her mother's suggestion, she began writing

stories at home to read aloud in school, remarking “Ms. Edwards will really like this one!” She wrote mostly personal narratives about her family and things that happened while she visited her grandparents, and occasionally fiction stories. These two reserved children became outgoing; they were comfortable in the spotlight of displaying their writing, and were viewed as leaders in the class four months after beginning to write at home.

The second year, a boy in my class was not making friends easily at school because he spoke fluent German and French while everyone else spoke English (as well as Spanish, Polish, or Chinese). In March, he composed a series of stories that spurred writing by other kids in a way I had not seen occur before or since. Inspired by reading Smurf comic books, he created a fictional character named a Mila (**my**-luh)—a figure with stick arms, hands, legs and feet; no fingers or toes; and only an apple tall. Writing in English, he composed a short story about his Mila character in a small book made from scrap paper, and brought it to school. I asked him to read it aloud, and seeing the interest of the other kids, he wrote a second Mila adventure that evening to read aloud the next day.

After reading the second little book to the class, he and I watched the other kids do something unique. They set up an assembly line without any preplanning and with little conversation. Kids cut up scrap paper, stapled pages together, and some of them began writing titles for new Mila books. The production of the books outpaced the writing of the stories to fill them, but these small books continued to be assembled throughout the rest of the week’s writing time. They were titled and numbered like books in a series. Other children wrote Mila stories at home to read aloud to the class. The writing experiences transformed his school days and ended his loneliness. He had so many friends to play with at recess, to sit with at lunch, to invite to his home after school, and to include in his birthday party, that he had no trouble feeling part of the group.

In the first and second years of the Writing Box study, similar developments occurred—children from among the third of the class who initially did not communicate easily in written language wrote imaginative stories at home, brought them to school and changed their academic position in the room as well as their outlook about writing. Beyond the initial allure of the writing materials, these youngsters found composing stories to be a personally rewarding form of self-expression and creativity. They used the new writing materials to discover ideas in their imaginations. They moved beyond their reluctance to write by creating interesting characters, commenting on personal situations and combining fiction and nonfiction to heighten the interest of their audience.

Exploring Fiction and Nonfiction

Another major transformation in how children wrote stories occurred during the 1990-91 school year. Leah Mermelstein, a university undergraduate student, conducted an independent research project in my classroom on ways to connect her college writing courses with the writing experiences of the first and second graders. She introduced a series of significant changes in my approach to inspiring story writing with children:

First, she invited children to write the same genres that she wrote in her college courses, including memories and personal narratives, poetry, and fiction-nonfiction stories. She did not assume that certain types of writing were too advanced or too sophisticated for young authors. Rather, she treated everyone as writers like herself.

Second, instead of expecting children to write alone, she invited them to compose in groups or pairs. Kids who wrote with ease and those who did not collaborated together on writing projects. She wrote with the children, sharing

the pencil, taking dictation, and working collaboratively as a member of the class writing group.

Third, she did not create any criteria for participating in a writing group—a child's reading fluency, knowledge of letter sounds, or use of standard spelling did not designate more capable or less capable writers. Everyone was able to write with Leah; the choice was theirs.

Fourth, she wrote and read her writing aloud with all the young authors in the room. She purposely modeled her process of writing—the same one she wanted youngsters to experience in their own writing.

Fifth, she focused conversations with children on how authors use language to communicate intended meaning to readers and listeners. In discussions and in their writing, children explored the process of deciding which words would evoke the audience response they wanted. Her emphasis throughout her research study was authors' use of language to impart meaning, to express humor, to heighten interest, and to convey images of people and places.

Personal memories was the first story writing genre she wrote with the children. Her memory came from an amusing incident that occurred when she was in second grade. Everyone had to leave school because of a tornado watch, but she thought that the teacher had announced a tomato watch. Riding the bus home, she searched the sky, waiting to see the huge tomato about to descend upon her town. The kids found her story amusing. It inspired them to write their memories to read aloud to the group.

From observing how interested the children were in Leah's story, I found literature openers for the writing of personal memories. I used Donald Crews's compelling picture book, *Shortcut* (1992). His story recalls a frightening childhood experience when he and his cousins find themselves out on the

railroad tracks in the face of an oncoming train after taking a forbidden shortcut on the way home. Children find the story fascinating and it raises many memories from their own lives, although not always of times when they were scared or had done something wrong.

To broaden the range of memories, I also used the book *Family Pictures: Cuadros de Familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza (1990). Written in Spanish and English, each scene is a memory of the author's experiences growing up along the Rio Grande River in Texas. The book provides glimpses of family life that offer children a way to connect to their own family experiences. No child has ever lacked a memory writing idea after hearing these first-person narratives read aloud in class, and their writing felt powerful to them.

Next, Leah asked the children to write two stories to read aloud to the class—one fiction and one nonfiction. After hearing both stories, class members had to vote which one they thought was true. Writers and listeners liked this activity because of the game of trying to fool each other. Children wrote in pairs—one writing fiction, the other nonfiction; or collaborated together on both stories. One youngster remarked to Leah after writing nonfiction that he could write fiction that would sound real enough to be believed by the other members of the class. When Charlie read his story aloud, he tricked everyone, demonstrating that a writer's choice of words can create a story that seems real even when it is not.

Then, Leah explored with the class how authors write about an event that actually happened, adding fascinating details or fictional occurrences to make the story more interesting—what she called “spicing up” the narrative. Children incorporated fictional details to “spice up” their stories and to create funnier memories than the ones they had actually experienced. As the students discovered new ways to interest their audience, fiction-nonfiction characteristics

influenced kids' creative reporting of lunch menus and weather reports on the Before Noon News.

Leah read books and stories aloud to show how published authors combine fiction and nonfiction to create humor and to demonstrate that children can use the same methods in their writing. By discussing how adult authors chose ideas and details to make stories funny, the children were inspired to write humor. This was the first time that I saw adult writing discussed with children as a blend of fiction and nonfiction elements. Their study of fiction legitimized the children's desire to create amusing stories using exaggeration and fantasy.

Because of its popularity, fiction-nonfiction writing occasioned continuing discussions about how different writers use language in their stories to create particular responses by readers and listeners. Anne Cameron's *The Stories Julian Tells* (1981) inspired Robert Maloy naming fiction-nonfiction story writing, "True Tales/Tall Tales." Kids' writing experiences made this term easily understood. Commonly children referred to their classmates' stories as either "true" or "tall."

Observing children's enthusiastic responses to analyzing published stories for fiction and nonfiction components, I thought of new ways to connect young children's writing to published literature. I began to remark to a child, "You know, your story reminds me of one that I like a lot by another author." Then I showed the story to the child. The effect was to increase the amount of writing that some children did after having their own story associated with that of a published author. Till Leah began sharing her own writing with kids, I had not purposefully tried to link children's ideas with those of adult writers. The reading-writing connection in our classroom became entwined in ways that I had never seen or thought of before.

In Spring 1996, I found a new set of literature to inspire children's fiction and nonfiction story writing. We were reading a series of mysteries about a brother and sister who climb into a magic tree house that takes them back in time to far off destinations (Osborne, 1992). Each book contains clues about a larger mystery that is solved in Book #8 as well as a half a dozen facts (placed in block form and bold print throughout the text) about the historical time period of the story.

I asked youngsters to write a story about themselves traveling through time for their home practice assignment. Keisha placed herself and her brother in Iceland for the first chapter of her story. Each evening, dictating to her mother, she added parts to it. Like all of the books in *The Magic Tree House* series, her story combined fiction—the story line—with nonfiction—facts about the place and the time. She used hers and her brother's names for the characters, chose a real place for the setting, and included actual details about the weather and the environment as parts of the setting for the story.

Like Ms. Pope Osborne's writing, this adventure was only one of a series of stories that she intended to write involving her two characters. Another child used a car his mother had recently purchased as the vehicle for travel in his adventure. In the story his mother did not know that the car was magical till she touched knobs on the dashboard and found the car flying through the air to spots she had not intended to go!

None of these new writing ideas would have been possible without Leah modeling them and me making them part of the classroom's regular writing experiences. Her influence was different than anyone else's had been in my teaching experience because she viewed herself as a practicing writer learning about the craft constantly—from the children's writing, published authors, other writers in her college courses, and from her own work with writing.

She enjoyed assisting children's decisions and revisions. Their exploration of using words and examining how others used words was endlessly fascinating to her. Kids were inspired by seeing and hearing what others had written in her writing groups. Many tried their own versions of something they heard or saw another child do. Every one of us learned from her coaching, modeling and affection for writing.

Because of what I learned, imaginative story writing, personal memories, and fiction-nonfiction stories became genres that could be written over and over in my curriculum, not short-ended activities whose appeal was limited by use. These genres required the children to make decisions about their writing—to choose their purpose, to use particular words to support it, and to write alone or with others. In so doing, children learned ways to use language to convey thoughts and emotions.

"I Wonder" Journals

During the third year of the Writing Box project a new form of journal writing unexpectedly became part of my curriculum. A boy from another classroom in the school joined ours in the middle of the year. In group discussions he continually interrupted other students, stating everything he wanted to say so loudly that no one could ignore or talk over him. After two weeks of repeating "It's not your turn" or "You are interrupting," I realized that I had to change my responses after hearing another child say these same phrases to him. I did not want the class to perceive him as a problem or to think that I disliked him, and I did not want him to view himself in these ways. I spoke in a softer voice and used non-verbal cues—waving my hand to get his attention and putting a finger over my lips when his voice was too loud. These changes were

partially helpful, but did not stop him from talking whenever he wanted to. A different strategy was clearly needed.

I started listening intently when he spoke, hoping to praise his ideas instead of silencing him. "Where does the water go when it goes into the sink?" was the first question I heard him ask. I began to reconsider his behavior. Here was a learner in search of answers to questions that interested him, not solely a kid who liked to talk a lot. He wanted information so he asked questions. I realized then that he possessed a powerful desire to find out about things. If I wanted all of the children to be as self-propelled and dedicated learning, I needed to design ways to help them all to ask questions.

Initially, I came up with no immediate ideas either for assisting him to find answers or for encouraging others to ask the questions. When he asked his next question in the middle my teaching, "Which wire brings electricity into the house? There are two of them, you know," I responded with a completely unplanned strategy which involved writing and addressed both of my goals.

"You need an 'I Wonder' journal," I said to him.

"What's an 'I Wonder' journal?" he asked.

"It is a place to write all of your questions so we can find the answers," I responded. "You have so many interesting questions that I cannot answer that you need to write them down so we do not forget them." Then I gave him a little blue notebook and he began writing.

The other kids had seen me give him this notebook and they had not received one. Thinking about this later, I recognized what I needed to do next. The next day I gave "I Wonder" journals to everyone in the class. As I handed them out, one child asked, "Why do we need these if we have no questions?"

“Because everybody has questions,” I replied. “We usually do not write them down, so we forget them before we get them answered. If we write the questions down, we will not forget them and we can find the answers.”

Like many of the classroom and curriculum changes generated by the Writing Boxes, “I Wonder” journals were initially created to suit a particular situation. Previously, I had not placed children’s questions at the center of my teaching. There was more than enough mandated curriculum to fill all of the instructional time. Questions and answers came largely from my plans. Asking children to write their questions so we could search for answers together meant that the class and I were embarking on something new. Where I hoped to create in children a sense of themselves as leaders of their learning, I had no idea that journaling would take us all somewhere I had never been before in my teaching.

To help answer the question about where the water goes in the sink, I sent home *The Magic School Bus at the Waterworks* (Cole, 1986) for the boy and his family to read together. They found the answer to his question. When he asked, “How does the electricity know which wire to go through?” I went to one of the school custodians whom I knew could talk with him about it. When another child asked how fresh water turns into salt water, I sent an adult to the library with him to investigate. They drew and wrote together and returned to the class to explain the answer during Sharing Meeting (see Figure 4.11). “I Wonder” journals were thus begun with little preplanning about how we would use them throughout the curriculum.

Asking Questions/Investigating Answers

Asking questions and investigating answers is fundamental to children’s learning. In order to grow and develop intellectually, children need to find out more and more about the world around them. “I Wonder” journals promote their

desire to know by placing children's own questions and discoveries at the center of their learning. Interestingly, many of children's questions relate to science and mathematics, as psychologist Michael Shermer (1989, pp. 4-5) has noted: "It's normal to want to know how things work and why the world is the way it is. At its most basic level, this is what science is all about. And scientists are just professionals at doing what children do so naturally."

"I Wonder" journals assist and encourage kids to think and act like scientists. According to three educators who have developed strategies for gender-fair teaching in mathematics and science, a scientist uses many different investigative skills:

1. making observations,
2. asking questions,
3. formulating and assessing hypotheses,
4. designing experiments,
5. collecting and analyzing data,
6. drawing conclusions, and
7. communicating results. (Skolnick, Langbort, & Day, 1982, p. 161)

These skills are the foundation for scientific and mathematical inquiry and are extremely important for success in education at every level. The more that young children can actively use these skills in their learning and writing, the more easily they will apply them to all of their school experiences.

Every year since "I Wonder" journals began, the children have spontaneously generated questions that they want to investigate. To encourage their inquisitiveness I listened carefully to their conversations to recognize and remark about questions I heard by saying, "Write that down in your 'I Wonder' journal. That is a wonderful question!" Occasionally I asked someone, "What are you wondering about?" When we discuss wondering, some children begin

to ask more questions. As children asked what they wanted to know, other children began to wonder aloud, too.

The children wrote their questions and their findings in their own words. Initially, I had thought “I Wonder” questions would strengthen reading skills when children read books to find answers. Writing added a new dimension to their learning and mine. Children discovered new ways to communicate their questions to other people using written language. They exercised the power of recording something that they could reread, enlarge or revise at another time. They acted like learners reunited with the learning process they had used throughout their preschool years — asking questions and expecting answers. Here are some of the questions asked by different children:

“How does electricity get into the sky?”

“How do people get their last names?”

“How hot is the sun?”

“How fast is a helicopter?”

“Why when you are in the air and you look down, the things under you look so small?”

“How much does air weigh? I think helium must weigh nothing at all because it is lighter than air.”

I was surprised by how much the children wanted to do activities and investigations to learn more about their questions. To answer his question about how much air weighs, one boy read a book and performed an experiment. To understand how shadows are made, a girl played with a flashlight in a dark room and invited other children to join her. To find out how people get last names, three girls read books and interviewed our school librarian about how African Americans got European names after they came to North America.

When the time kids spent with their projects was enjoyable, they enthusiastically returned to their "I Wonder" journals to continue experimenting and gathering information. Their enjoyment resulted from information they found humorous or from presentations they thought were interesting. One boy was quite amused to find that dragonflies hide their eyes between their legs! Enthusiasm developed when information surprised kids and they thought that it was neat. It shocked everyone to discover that electricity was everywhere—even in their hair! To find this out, we took off our shoes and scuffed our feet on the carpet. Then we tried to give each other electrical shocks through touching.

Youngsters require the assistance of an interested adult to guide the research and to make it interesting. One young girl spent an hour working with motors and batteries as another child's mother showed her one trick after another with paper, plastic lids, and pictures attached to a small motor. Sometimes the questions that initiate a child's research are not the questions that are finally answered. Kids become interested in other questions during their investigations and leave the first to pursue a second. Amanda was originally wondering about dragonflies but soon became fascinated by ants. As she gathered more and more information about ants, she decided to create her own ant farm from the junk area in the room. Over the weekend I added plastic ants to her model. When she returned to school on Monday she was surprised to find model ants in her model ant farm!

Once kids have acquired the information they are seeking, they are excited about sharing what they know with the rest of the class. There are a variety of ways of sharing the knowledge they have discovered. When we published a class newspaper, some children included their "I Wonder" research results in the newspaper. Others performed experiments in front of the class, inspiring classmates to try the experiments, too. Children have published their discoveries

during sharing meeting and on the Before Noon News. Kids gain immense satisfaction from teaching others, adults as well as peers, what they know. When a child shares knowledge, the whole class is informed and the youngster teaching feels like an expert.

Questions in Mathematics, Science and Social Studies

During the past three years, I have sought ways to include children's "I Wonder" questions in my teaching of the school district's mathematics, science and social studies curriculum. To promote mathematical learning, I had children conduct their own polls and surveys using "Doug's Graph," an open-ended survey form originated by Amherst educator Doug Ruopp. A child writes a question and then conducts a poll, asking for responses from children and adults around the class or around the school. When the survey is finished, the results are displayed on a bar graph which the child constructs from the survey information (see Figure 4.12).

Everyone who has done it once likes this graphing activity enough to do it repeatedly. One reason is that the survey's question belongs to the child. Another is that going around the room or the school surveying people is a unique experience, imparting a powerful feeling of "being in charge" to the child taking the poll. Writing and reading are integrated into the activity but the stimulus for learning is the freedom to interview others to gain information. When some of the children asked questions that could be answered by a yes, no, or maybe response, they revised Doug's original form to include a "maybe" response. They also changed yes-no responses to others based on specific choices; for example, "What is your favorite food, pizza or hot dogs?"

A science experiment that I arranged each fall of the past two years uses the block area as a laboratory for children to answer "I wonder" questions about

motion and speed. In this activity, groups of children make a ramp from large and small wooden blocks in order to roll balls the width of our classroom, out the door and across the corridor into the music room. I design the groups (three children, boys and girls, not best friends) so kids who would not choose each other as partners work together to accomplish a project that they all enjoy.

They make drawings of their ramps and show where their balls rolled the farthest. This project encourages practice with scientific process. The children posit what they think will occur with a ramp. They act on their theory, build the ramp and test it with balls, marking the distance of the rolls with pieces of masking tape on the floor. They often change their ramp design or modify it, and try the experiment again.

Their being in charge of trying out their own ideas and decisions, and recording the results to show and report to others is the part of the scientific process that they like to do over and over. This is an effective way for me to connect an "I Wonder" journal to specific science concepts—motion, speed and friction—that I want to teach in the classroom. Children record their questions and their results in the journal, making their own efforts to answer a question the first feature of their writing.

While the ramps are being built, a second project is launched to encourage children's "I Wonder" questions and scientific investigations—child-created experiments with spinning tops. I have assembled a large collection of tops in many sizes and shapes, made of different materials. The children ask their own questions and record what they find out as they use these materials. As they play with the tops they are beginning an introduction to one of the school district's mandated science units, "Earth Changes."

As the "I Wonder" journals have evolved, my goal has been to find ways to use children's questions to introduce required school district curriculum. One

year a child's question, "How were clocks invented?" introduced the "Earth Changes" science unit. Another year when a child asked about the constellations, the stars in the heavens introduced the same unit. We turned the large wooden climber in our room on its side to make a planetarium by covering it with black plastic shower curtains and putting constellations made from glow-in-the-dark stars inside. This was very attractive to the kids. They enjoyed using flashlights and glow-in-the-dark objects inside of our planetarium.

I have found that questions and answers about one topic lead readily to other topics that I must teach as part of the district's curriculum. The question about how clocks were invented let me connect "Earth Changes" to the making of a water clock. A group of children built the clock to investigate how the first clocks worked. I showed the class a sundial that we used to tell time outside our classroom. The following year some of the same children were in the class. Then we measured shadows for an hour one day trying to find true noon in Amherst.

"I Wonder" questions became an introduction to our social studies unit, "The History of Amherst," through the wonderful picture book *Who Came Down That Road?* by George Ella Lyon (1992). The story begins before the title page with a boy about the age of the children in my classroom gazing at his mother with interest and asking, "Mama, who came down that road?" Beautifully illustrated by Peter Catalanoto, the text poses this "I Wonder" question repeatedly, answering it in a poetic, spare form as we wander down a road back in time through history. Past the settlers in covered wagons, past the indigenous peoples, past bison and elk and before that mastodon and dinosaur, back to the primordial sea that covered the land, out into space we go to the final answer, "Questions came before . . . the mystery of the making place."

Who Came Down That Road? is a child's question that takes the class on a quest for answers which scientists around the world are investigating now. It

sets the stage for our exploration of local, national, world and natural history. It connects us to science and to spinning tops that represent planets in our solar system. After reading the book aloud I ask students to choose either to make a map showing the schoolyard as it looks today, how it might have looked way back in time, or to forecast how it might appear in the next century. The class reads other children's literature to show the changes of a place over time, from wilderness to cityscape, from country to suburbia. These texts serve as a basis for writing narratives that as of tomorrow will be memories. I comment that this is how history is made—by ordinary people living ordinary lives and making important decisions each day.

One year a child's "I Wonder" question, "What is bamboo?" brought the class into the Japan, another unit in our social studies curriculum. An article in *Ranger Rick* magazine explained how many kinds of bamboo grow in Japan, their incredibly fast rate of growth, and their uses not only as food for the Panda Bear, but also as structural materials for building and for all kinds of products. The child who asked the question became the leader of a class walk across the university campus to a greenhouse where bamboo was growing and had been used to make fences around the plants.

Managing "I Wonder" Journals

In my version of an ideal school every child would be asking "I Wonder" questions daily. After writing their questions, children would research answers with adult tutors who facilitate, but do not direct, the learning process. "I Wonder" journals would highlight and support the reality that every child is a teacher of some things as well as a learner of many things. Yet letting children's questions drive the curriculum goes against the grain of how most adults think

children learn and how curriculum is taught. Teachers usually control what information is introduced to focus students' attention on mandated units.

Utilizing "I Wonder" journals challenges conventional norms and expectations about how children learn and how adults teach, as I witnessed a few years ago. I asked a prepracticum student to lead an investigation with three boys about a question posed by one of them: "How was money invented?" At my suggestion that she make the activity interactive, she collected shells, beads, feathers, and money from other countries. She and the boys wore the necklaces, traded the beads and feathers, examined the money, and then she read them short texts from two books about the historical evolution of money. Afterwards, the kids asked me, "Can we do that again tomorrow?"

The prepracticum student had assisted the youngsters' learning in an engaging way that made them want to continue researching money. Her college supervisor, observing the activity, commented that the prepracticum student had not taught enough academic content to the boys. I reassured the prepracticum student that she had indeed met and exceeded all of my expectations for the lesson. By devising an interesting way of presenting the material, she had taught them more than they knew before, and had done it in a way that they wanted to do it again. To me, the "I Wonder" question had been answered in a kid-centered way that was a positive learning experience for everyone.

When encouraged to voice "I Wonder" questions, children ask an enormous number of them. Teachers face complex decisions about how much time and focus should go into answering individual questions from students. Because the questions compete for time with teacher-directed learning, no one ever gets every question answered. I am continually trying to solve the dilemma of how to facilitate the question asking and answer finding process. One way to manage this interesting way of learning is to relate what kids want to know with

the curriculum they are expected to learn. Another way is to teach children how to access and use resources by themselves or in peer groups.

I found that forming groups of children is an ideal way to research questions. A single child does not have to answer a single question all by herself. Kids want to work as a team to do experiments, share knowledge, and record what they have learned. I ask who would like to join a questioner to find information and choose interested volunteers to be the "I Wonder Question" investigation team. Three girls formed a group to explore one of their questions—"What is an echidna?" We read the word in a book but it was unfamiliar to everyone. So the girls investigated in the library with the assistance of a prepracticum student working in the classroom. They looked in books and went to a CD-ROM about animals, wrote what they learned, and broadcast the information on the Before Noon News.

A third way to address "I Wonder" questions is to send books and materials home to involve families in the process of finding answers to ensure that children are not frustrated by lack of attention to their inquiries. Books and magazines, science kits, and other materials to use for experiments are sent home so adults can assist kids to discover information and to write about what they learn. In my interviews with six families during the third year of the Writing Box project, adults unanimously reported that children were more enthusiastic about their "I Wonder" journals than about any other writing they did at home or at school.

One family liked the idea of an "I Wonder" journal at school so they started one at home. Kristina asked, "How do snakes go to the bathroom?" Her mother called the Hitchcock Nature Center and made an appointment with the librarian who met with the girl, a friend of hers, and the mother to explain the answer to the group. The girl, with the assistance of her friend, reported their

findings to the class, whose initial reaction to the question was, "Oh, yuck!" but whose final response became "NEAT!"

Inspired by Writing Boxes and by "I Wonder" journals, Susan Mitchell, the school system's Science Resource Teacher, used Eisenhower funds to make traveling science boxes for children's experiments at home. Each box has different hands-on materials: tops and spinning objects, magnifying lenses and implements to catch aquatic life, mirrors, and magnets. There are resource books for answering questions as well as a journal for writing what the child learned by experimenting with the materials. When one of the science boxes is returned to school, the child can read what she wrote in the journal and demonstrate her knowledge with the materials. These science boxes are popular items in the classroom and for home practice activities. They say to a child, "You are a writer and a scientist right now with new things to learn that you can teach others."

Literacy and learning activities created by "I Wonder" journals focus children's attention. Youngsters who have a hard time paying attention during traditional modes of instruction have a much easier time connecting to "I Wonder" journals, probably because these feature their own questions and concerns. I engage the assistance of adults who volunteer time in the classroom, or who are there as part of their coursework, to do interesting activities to answer children's questions. It is important to publish children's findings to their "I Wonder" questions. Making posters or placemats and broadcasting results on the Before Noon News proved to be effective ways for children to share their knowledge. This encouraged kids to ask more questions. Youngsters like knowing something that others do not and like to teach what they know.

Doing activities for "I Wonder" questions proves that knowledge is gained everyday by everybody who wants to learn. These experiences and field trips do not reinforce or reward the mistaken assumption that the smartest people

are those who already know a lot or who seem to learn things most easily. They instead reveal the real process of getting smarter. "I Wonder" journals are equal opportunity innovations, encouraging everyone to participate in the process of learning through investigating what interests them and enjoying the work.

Technology in the Classroom

When the Writing Boxes first went home, I knew two ways to write, with a hand-held writing tool or on a typewriter. I had little knowledge of how to use the one computer in my classroom—an Apple II Plus owned by the school. Nor did I have a home computer for my personal use. School computer software was stored for sign out in the library. The closest printer was in another room across the hall. Since I had no desire to include the computer in my teaching, I confined my use of technology to a filmstrip projector and the school's television. Purchasing a home computer stimulated my interest in better utilizing technology in the classroom, as did my reading about computers in education (Office of Technology Assessment, 1988; Papert, 1980; Turkle, 1984).

Since 1988, I regularly acquired more powerful machines to extend the range of children's learning with technology in the classroom. Table 4.2 documents changes in computer technology along with the primary uses of each type of computer by the children during the Writing Box project. These computers came through donations to the school by parents or university faculty; I purchased one Macintosh machine myself. As the children and I discovered ways to use them, the machines became more central to children's writing. Youngsters eagerly pursued discovering what might happen as words and images moved rapidly across computer screens.

Table 4.2 Computers and software in a writing process classroom

Computer Type	Time in the Room	Use by Children	Software
Apple II Plus	5 years	Drawing/ Education Games	Delta Drawing/ FaceMaker
Apple II C	4 years	Writing/ Publishing	Applewriter
Digital VAXmate	2 months	E-Mail messages	ProCom Plus
Compac DeskPro 285 (2 machines)	1 year	Math Games	Millie's Math House/ Treasure Mathstorm
Macintosh SE	6 months	Writing/ Publishing	Microsoft Word 5.1a
Color Macintosh LC 575 w/CD-ROM	3 years	Writing/ Publishing Science/Math	Kid Pix/Creative Writer/CD-ROMs
HP Desk Writer 550C Printer	3 years	Publishing/ Children's Writing	Printer connected to the LC 575
SuperNintendo	1 year	Morning messages/ Songs/Drawing	Mario-Paint-with a-Mouse

Initial Connections Between Computers and Writing

In 1990, Robert Maloy, my research colleague in the School of Education, loaned his Apple II C computer to the classroom. Now, for the first time, I had two machines for the children to use. Both computers had Applewriter, an early word-processing program that ran on the II C. Because Applewriter featured many commands that must be remembered in order to load, save and print material, it was not particularly user-friendly for five, six, seven, and eight year-olds. On the other hand, with the assistance of an adult, kids could type in stories and messages, and then print their writing.

Stories by children on Applewriter represented a modest first effort to promote writing on the computers. Word-processing supported students' creative efforts to write and publish their own stories quickly on an electronic medium that fascinated them. From this point forward, children began to see the computer area as a writing and publishing center where their imaginations and creativity could be expressed through technology.

E-mail (electronic communications using computers) became part of the classroom in 1992. The children were intrigued by the idea of rapidly communicating with people in other places. "How is this possible?" they asked, eager to try out something new on the computers. Moreover, E-mail connected directly to letter writing that was already occurring in the room. There was "local mail" and now we would have "E-mail." Logistically, the idea initially seemed far removed from the day-to-day realities of my public elementary school classroom. We needed a modem, a phone line, a paid account at the University Computer Center, and training to get on-line. Then there were the questions of who to write to and would they write back. Sending mail quickly loses its appeal if young children never receive replies to their messages.

A University graduate student introduced E-mail to the classroom. Deborah Brink was pursuing her secondary English teacher certification through the School of Education's Math English Science Technology Education Program (MESTEP). In MESTEP, certification candidates completed a semester-long teaching practicum and a semester-long internship in an alternative educational setting—usually a high technology corporation. Deborah had been teaching in an adult education center where her responsibilities had ended before the semester was over. She needed an additional 5 week internship combining her interests in language arts with educational technologies. Teachers in Mark's Meadow were interested in learning more about computers and how the school

might develop an overall plan for integrating technology into all grades. Deborah agreed to act as a school-wide technology resource person for teachers who were interested in special projects.

E-mail became a focus of Deborah's work in my classroom somewhat coincidentally. Because I was emphasizing "I Wonder" journals at the time, I was eager to find college interns who would work with individual children to search for information about their questions. Typically this meant going to the library or looking through resource books in the classroom to locate key information. Deborah suggested putting children's "I Wonder" questions on the Physics Forum, a University sponsored bulletin board. Other teachers might see the questions and encourage their students to send answers or children in other parts of the country might welcome the opportunity to correspond with our class. This was largely a hit or miss process without guarantees that anyone would reply to the children, but it seemed exciting. Enough answers appeared and enough students around the globe wrote to us to ensure continuing interest in seeing what was waiting on E-mail each day.

To ensure that children got replies to their questions, Deborah enlisted the aid of other MESTEP students. Many of them were working in schools and corporations in the eastern part of the state and communicated with each other regularly using E-mail. The children addressed their inquiries to specific MESTEP students who then did some research and sent thoughtful replies to the kids' questions. Children actually did most of their E-mail letter writing in the School of Education's computer lab. The lab was equipped with Digital VAXmate computers and modem connections. Deborah took small groups to the lab every morning. She also downloaded information from different bulletin boards and displayed it on our classroom VAXmate.

New Technologies Offer New Writing Possibilities

Writing with computers received new momentum during the 1993-94 school year with the introduction of a Macintosh SE (loaned by Robert Maloy) followed by a Macintosh LC 575 with color monitor and HP Desk Writer 550C color printer (purchased with my own funds), and the donation of two Compaq DeskPro IBM-compatible machines (by the parents of one of my students). I installed the *Microsoft Word 5.1a* word-processing program on the Macintosh machines, and then added *Kid Pix* (1992) and *Creative Writer* (1993), two drawing and publishing programs designed specifically for young children to write, illustrate, and record their own voices reading their texts.

Three computers in the room made possible more small group instruction and facilitated the development of learning centers in the room. I did less large group teaching once the machines were a regular part of the classroom curriculum. Each computer served as an ever-ready teacher's aide, able to accommodate a single child or small groups of students while I was working with the rest of the class. Easily accessible computers created many more writing opportunities—children eagerly spent time with a favorite computer program and became inspired to write poems and stories. Sometimes, kids who were less willing to write using conventional tools were happy to use the computer for their written communications.

Poetry recorded on interactive CD-ROMs permitted students to see and hear written language in ways not possible before. Children in the 1995-96 class regularly enjoyed *The New Kid On The Block*, a selection of Jack Prelutsky's poems on CD-ROM (1993). Through animated action and characters the sophisticated vocabulary of the poems is demonstrated to young readers and listeners. The cartoons delight the students while teaching vocabulary, rhyming and rhythm. Interest and inquiry are why kids watch, listen, and play with the

poems repeatedly, memorizing some or all of the lines of their favorites. The technology allows youngsters to see and hear poems before they can read them or know the meanings of all the words. CD-ROMs introduce new ways of learning about and writing poetry in the language arts curriculum.

Two youngsters wrote their own version of their favorite poem from *The New Kid On The Block*, using some of the vocabulary they had learned in the original. Because the entire class knew Jack Prelutsky's poem, everyone was charmed by the new version. Child-composed versions and original poems can be recorded and illustrated on the computer.

CD-ROMs also feature interactive stories on the computer. We have used two titles I purchased from the Living Books series, *Just Grandma and Me* (1993) and *Little Monster at School* (1994). Children were eager to hear these read aloud on the computer and to explore their many unusual features hidden in the illustrations. These computer stories promoted reading practice for less proficient readers. Everyone, regardless of reading fluency, interacted together at the computers because no child refused an invitation to use them.

Along with poetry and stories on interactive CD-ROM, I added other technology-based writing tools to the classroom. Small, hand-held electronic spellers aided my teaching of conventional spelling. The spellers convert invented spellings of words into a list of possible standard spellings. Having several choices allowed me to discuss with children how close their invented spellings were to book spellings, and to add interest to the editing part of the writing process model I was teaching. Tape recorders also are inviting writing tools. Youngsters could record their stories, songs, plays, and poems on their own tape and listen to them whenever they chose to. Recording writing created a sense of performance for the children eager to hear their own words.

As I continued to purchase more advanced computer technology, the children became independent learners with the software programs and CD-ROMs. Technology so quickly advances ease of use that computers, electronic spellers and dictionaries, and tape recorders are now viewed as learning tools for young students where a decade ago they were in the hands of adults much more than children. Just as technology taught adults, it now teaches children as well, as the options for learning double and triple every year.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the beginning of the Writing Box project in 1988, I could not have predicted that I was launching myself as well as my current and future students into a multi-year effort to create new forms of curriculum and instruction in our classroom. I deliberately planned a one year experiment related to family involvement in children's learning in order to see what might be possible if school and home were linked together to promote literacy development through writing. But what ensued was a testimony to the inventiveness and creativity of young minds. Youngsters transformed my initial modest home-school partnership into a series of sweeping changes that are as yet unfinished, which have created a whole new way for me to approach teaching language arts and all other curriculum in first and second grade.

The children accomplished this transformation through their writing and their genuine affection for learning. What they wrote from their own ideas is so astonishing that the scope of how writing affects learning is what I am only now beginning to understand. Children's notes, letters, poetry, stories, and nonfiction writing, along with a host of other written communications, propelled new activities that influenced my thinking with a force unmatched by anything else that I have experienced in my teaching career.

While I attempted to keep up with what young writers wanted to do, new classroom patterns were assembled and set in place, only to be modified and set in place anew as children brought in their writing from home and spontaneously

created writing in the classroom. I realize now I too was a learner and they too were teachers. I promoted children's learning and increased my own by "following their lead" and adapting my teaching plans to accommodate their writing interests. As I included new forms of children's writing in the curriculum and the daily classroom schedule, long-routinized, seldom-questioned teaching strategies were altered. Seeing the results of these changes, my assumptions about what children know, what they can learn and how I might teach them fueled processes of change that are ongoing today.

Writing Boxes for every child and new activities featuring writing throughout the curriculum gave my students a powerful impetus to write. My job as a teacher expanded from dispensing knowledge to deciding when to lead, when to follow, and when to get out the way to let the students pursue their own knowledge. My overarching goal was to promote writing for all the children in the classroom, so I focused on three common experiences for everyone:

- Every child had the opportunity to express creativity and imagination in her or his own words.
- Every child had access to materials and participated in activities that offered occasions and support for writing and drawing.
- Every child's cultural and linguistic experiences were honored as critical dimensions of self-expression and self-identity.

In so doing, I established ways for youngsters to think of themselves as writers by providing an interested and supportive audience of children and adults in the classroom who valued the efforts of every writer.

New Strategies for Teaching Writing to Young Children

As I began writing this summary chapter, I outlined a number of questions that have guided my thinking throughout the eight years of the Writing Box project:

What are the major conclusions of this project?

How have my teaching strategies and curriculum practices evolved?

What ideas might elementary school teachers draw from my experiences designing and implementing new instructional approaches to inspire writing by first and second grade students?

How might elementary school teachers change their teaching strategies and methods to make it possible for all children to write more often in school?

What are the implications of this research for the development and improvement of elementary school language arts teaching and children's literacy learning?

The following conclusions and implications are offered specifically for elementary school and early childhood educators. Although they are derived from one individual's experiences in a single classroom over an eight year time frame, these represent strategies and approaches to children's writing development that are adoptable and adaptable by adults in other settings. My research adds to educators' knowledge base about children's writing development. And, the Writing Box study illuminates one of the key ideas about the processes of educational reform in the complex and demanding organizational settings of public schools—that change emerges from the sustained efforts of teachers to implement new approaches to learning.

Any curriculum innovation like the Writing Box is useful and practical to teachers only if it is adaptable or transferable from one classroom or one school organization to another. This does not imply that an idea must or should be replicated in a new setting exactly as it was implemented in the first. Research on educational change, including the Rand Change Agent Study in the 1970s (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978) and the work of theorist Michael Fullan (1982; 1996), suggests that adaptability is as important as transferability when dealing with school reform ideas. Teachers must be able to adopt and then adapt a change idea to fit their circumstances, for only if they see ways to make the idea successful with their students do teachers believe that it will work for them. Then they “own” the change idea.

Many aspects of the Writing Boxes are easily transferable and infinitely adaptable: the materials, the ways that families and children interact with them, the way that teachers change their daily schedule to highlight writing from home or school are all flexible characteristics. These remain the skeleton of the project whether a teacher has 18 or 36 students; whether a school has the monetary resources to provide Writing Boxes to every child; or whether a classroom teacher spends personal funds to create writing containers for everyone or just a few for students to take home on a sign-out basis; whether a family speaks the language of the school or a home language.

Only one thing is essential to maintain exactly as it has evolved in my classroom work with children—the belief that all children are writers and that adults as writing coaches make writing something a child feels able to do successfully. Communication between adult and child about writing must exude

enjoyment and responses to children's efforts are always complimentary first, instructive second.

Conclusion 1: Writing Materials for Every Child

At the inception of the project, I assumed that interesting materials would be an important invitation to writing, but I did not foresee the powerful effects that Writing Boxes would have on my students. Co-researcher Robert Maloy, Christine Kubin, the intern in my classroom, and I wondered if materials would inspire children to draw but not to write, thereby short-circuiting our goal of inspiring writing. We hoped that Writing Boxes, accompanied by a guide to families explaining how these materials could be useful to children's learning, would generate writing at home and connect families with the classroom in an exchange of literacy activities. We did not know whether Writing Boxes would be interesting in the long term or if they might become a short-lived novelty, used a few times and then abandoned for the latest game or toy.

We chose the materials for the Writing Box with children's interest in mind, trying not to impose an adult's idea of appropriate writing tools. The first items we purchased were a pencil sharpener glued into the bottom of a small globe and colored plastic see-through rulers with cut-out shape templates. Small staplers were added because I had longed for one when I was 7 years old. We chose shiny pencils, scented markers, different sized notebooks, many kinds of paper and glue as well as tape. Use and reuse were our guiding principles; items had to be sturdy but also intriguing, child sized and available in different colors for individual choice.

Over the eight years of the study, some of the children in my classroom had writing materials readily available for their use at home; others did not have the wealth of choices that were contained in their Writing Boxes. Irrespective of children's prior experiences with writing materials, every year the Writing Boxes were an immediate success. This was reported in the comments of families and children after the Boxes went home.

The importance of choosing and owning a set of materials for exclusive use outside of school did not appear at first to be the sine qua non for children's writing that I found it was. The allure of the items was immediate and compelling. From toddlers to teenagers, younger and older siblings, friends and cousins wanted to use the materials to express their ideas. Interesting and open-ended tools exceeded all of our expectations about their importance to young writers. They invited children to begin writing, and once kids did, they continued to do so.

Astonishing changes in writing habits were generated among some of the children by the Writing Boxes. While a few kids had been encouraged to write at home and had done so regularly, others had avoided writing and drawing altogether. With their Writing Boxes, some children set up offices in the family living room or kitchen; took their Boxes everywhere they went, even to bed at night and to church on Sunday; "taught" younger brothers and sisters about writing. Some kept their materials in pristine condition, using things that they already had for their writing and keeping their Writing Box as prime storage for their most special items.

For other children, changes occurred but then stopped because the materials did not last long. Some scattered the contents all over the house,

amongst other paper and writing utensils. A few had lost or abused most of the items in two or three weeks, and then asked if they could have another Writing Box. One family who received Writing Boxes three years in a row never had them intact after two or three weeks of use.

With their Boxes children who had never before written at home, wrote and published; some in more than one language. Some mailed their writing to other family members. Some brought their writing to school and read it aloud to the class. One youngster brought in over 150 pages of stories he had written at home with the materials in his Writing Box and declared three months later that “he wanted to be the boy who wrote the most books in the world.” Students have told me that they still have their Writing Boxes years after second grade.

At the same time that writing at home was changing dramatically, Writing Boxes were promoting more writing by more children than I ever saw in my classes before. Virtually every child who got a Writing Box used it to explore the different kinds of writing that they could create using the materials. What followed from the Writing Boxes each year can accurately be described as an “explosion of writing” by many of the children. The momentum for writing changed how I organized my classroom. I started to make more time for writing during the school day, and to teach new lessons with writing as a focal point of student activity and learning.

It is unclear how to explain the impact of Writing Boxes on children’s writing. Perhaps it is the sense of free self-expression implied by Peter Elbow’s declaration that the Writing Boxes have only one rule for children to follow— “Don’t let anyone tell you how to use this Box.” The kinds of materials in the Boxes were free of anyone else’s ideas or predetermined uses—no coloring

books or work sheets to fill in answers were included. The fact that children believed that these were “my” materials in “my” Writing Box to keep and use throughout the school year and afterwards as well, without any direct instruction from adults, conferred the compelling message “You can write what you want, when you want to, and share it with whomever you choose.”

Since adults were as unfamiliar with a Writing Box as children, the children had definite say in what to do with them. Just having a work station where everything that they might need to create a story, movie, song, poem, drawing, book, or sign enabled children to do things that they had never tried before. Most likely, the astonishing results for many kids came from an intricate interplay of three factors—inviting materials, ownership of the outcomes, and desire to experiment, combined with my own enthusiasm and that of family members for the project.

Conclusion 2: New Classroom Structures Promote Writing

Just as I did not predict the power of providing children with materials to own and use at home, neither did I foresee that the Writing Boxes would lead to a dramatic altering of five parts of my classroom structure. Now, eight years later, the classroom patterns and schedules have been so fundamentally changed that they can never return to what previously existed.

First, I modified the daily classroom schedule to incorporate writing activities throughout the day and across the curriculum. I began to use parts of the school day that were normally not thought of as instructional times as opportunities to get children to do more writing and reading—before the start of school; during morning snack; as part of “you-choose” time; at recess; and

during the lunch period. In many classrooms, these times are used for transitions between one set of academic activities and another, but not for further instruction. As I experimented with my schedule, I fashioned ways to use this valuable time for children to pursue writing activities and reading projects that they enjoyed. As the children wrote, they also gained the practice with language essential to moving ahead academically.

Second, I introduced a series of short, regularly occurring writing activities for all children. "The Before Noon News," a large-group class meeting time just before lunch, enabled me to publish several different types of writing: personal, local and national news reports; a "weather report" using the weather map from *USA TODAY* and weather data from *The Boston Globe*; make-believe and real lunch menus where the class votes on the actual menu of the day after hearing the possible choices; and answers to personal "I Wonder" journal questions that summarize research done by students. This meeting is prized as a time for self-expression in front of everyone in the classroom community.

Other regularly occurring writing includes letters to other kids in the class using the classroom mailboxes; home practice assignments that are read on the Before Noon News or read to me; the twice-monthly visits of the college writing partners who co-author different genres with the children; and my continual suggestion to children to write notes, lists, and signs to communicate messages to others. These formal and informal communications generate considerable writing and add to students' overall development of language skills and literacy learning.

Third, I filled the classroom with tools for writing, including "Classroom Writing Boxes" and computers with open-ended writing and publishing software for individual and group use. Ink pads and stamp sets, letter stencils, different

kinds and colors of markers and crayons, press on letters, and unusual items like a vibrating pen were also added to the choices available to the students. These are introduced at various times of the year to heighten and sustain interest in writing.

Fourth, I integrated writing into home practice (or homework). Many times a month children are instructed to “write something at home tonight for home practice.” Their choices are the same ones that they have in the classroom: poems, personal narratives, letters, news reports, menus, “I Wonder” journal entries, or True Tale—Tall Tale stories. Home practice is supported by the Writing Boxes. The children are invited to use the materials in their boxes in their home practice writing. Often the invitation to use the materials at home results in children bringing new and different types of writing to school.

Five, I asked children to create different forms of public text (signs, alphabets, announcements, sign-in attendance charts, morning messages) in the classroom. The alphabet that is displayed on one wall of the classroom is designed and illustrated by the students. Signs that hang for others to read are child written, as are lists and notes to me and to each other. As the year progresses, I include children in composing the morning message for the class to read. In this way, they are involved in constructing text that is read and enjoyed by their classmates.

While the physical floor plan of the room has remained nearly the same (except for the introduction of computers), the use of the space and my expectations for learning changed as a result of what children did with their Writing Boxes. Modifications to my classroom schedule and structure made it possible to include and highlight writing in ways that I had not done prior to the Writing Box project. Now, there was writing on the walls, in the halls, on the

Before Noon News, in the classroom mailboxes, in creative stories and poems as well as nonfiction journals, and in pages and pages of home practice activities. This writing showed how much kids do learn when they have structures that allow them to demonstrate in new and different ways what they are thinking and wanting to share with others.

Conclusion 3: New Strategies for Talking About Writing

Writing Boxes and the “explosion of writing” that followed their introduction into the classroom necessitated new ways of talking about writing with children. It quickly became apparent that a traditional vocabulary of phonics-based instruction, workbook practice, and writing bound in daily journals did not coincide with what was happening with writing at home or in the classroom. Children needed opportunities to talk about their writing materials; the stories and poems they were imagining in their heads; and the science and mathematics they were learning in the classroom. They wanted to do what adult writers do all the time—share their ideas with readers and listeners (both children and adults) and respond to the feedback they receive when they discuss their writing with others (Kitagawa & Kitagawa, 1987).

Each year, children were less interested in talking about how words were spelled or how sentences were constructed or how punctuation is added to the text than they were in reading their stories aloud to a audience and answering questions about how they got their ideas, why they wrote what they wrote, and whether the piece was fiction, nonfiction, or a blend of both. While as a teacher, I recognized the importance of learning the conventions of written language, I also wanted to seize the momentum for writing created by the Writing Boxes. I

established daily times during the class schedule for children to write and to publish their writing. Next, I needed ways to talk with the children that would support and extend their interests in written communications.

The most important change in how I talked with children about writing were my initial explanations of what writing is and who writers are. “Every one of you is a writer, right now,” I announced to the class at the beginning of the school year. “There are many things that I do not know about you; the foods you like, what you did during the summer vacation, who your friends are or your favorite books and movies. But one very important thing I do know about every one of you is that you are all writers right now because you have ideas and pictures in your heads that you want to share. That’s what writers have—ideas and pictures in their heads.”

Some children respond positively to being identified as writers. Others are unsure of what I mean and what they are expected to do. I tell them “When you have ideas and pictures in your head and you share them with other people, you are storyteller; you are an artist; you are a poet; you are a writer.”

There are key moments where what is said is crucial to how children think about their writing. These times include: discussing possible writing topics before children start to write; responding to what children have written while it is still in progress; and discussing the writing after it has been shared in a supportive publishing format. As the Writing Box project progressed, the following strategies became themes in my conversations with children about writing:

First, I explain that becoming a writer involves recalling the skills children used continuously as babies, toddlers, and preschoolers to learn to walk, talk and

ride a tricycle, and using them to understand the new curriculum they are now ready for in elementary school.

Second, I state that we will be doing a lot of writing in everything we are learning, including “I Wonder” science journals, math comics and imaginative stories and poetry in social studies.

Third, I assign writing as a home practice activity expecting every child’s to be different and therefore instructive to everyone else.

Fourth, I tell children that they will be teaching each other all year. This allows me to group children in many different ways for writing and reading instruction.

Fifth, I refer to and introduce all class members, children and adults, as teachers—most below the age of nine, a few above the age of nine, and I refer to adults as adults, not solely as teachers.

Sixth, I define children’s roles when exchanging information as helping each other as teachers and learners.

Seventh, I say to children all the time, “Thank you for teaching me that.”

Finally, I write, publish, and discuss my own writing with the class.

Conclusion 4: Writing Processes Fit for a Child

Another major conclusion of the Writing Box study was the importance of having the teacher (and all the other adults in the classroom) consistently implementing a process approach to young children’s writing. Each year confirmed that to write confidently and regularly, young writers must experience writing as a process. When this occurred, children enjoyed their writing times, saw writing as an opportunity for creative self-expression, and learned

conventions of written language as they communicated what was important to them.

The idea of writing process is well established in the literature on how people learn to write. Process model advocates contend that writers need encouragement and support through a series of steps or stages involved in constructing written communications. In their view, writing emerges through ongoing actions by a writer and interactions between the writer, other writers, and readers and listeners who comprise various audiences for the text.

As set forth by Donald Graves (1983, 1985) and other writing researchers, the act of writing begins with “prewriting” in which the writer engages in freewriting, brainstorming, group discussions, read alouds, or other activities that serve as a warm-up and catalyst for writing. Next, the writer focuses on getting a “first draft” of written communication down on the page. Optimally, the writer allows ideas to flow forth without editing or revising; the goal is to write what comes to mind and see where the ideas take the writing.

Once a draft is generated, the writer revises and edits the writing, making changes (both additions and deletions) to clarify the meaning and improve the communication of the ideas to readers and listeners. Typically, revision and editing is connected to receiving feedback on the writing from an audience, and using those ideas to guide whatever changes the writer chooses to make. Finally, the writing is published when the writer feels the material is ready to be shared with others as a complete (but not necessarily completed) work. Publishing involves many different formats, but each one enables the writer to make the text available for others to read or hear.

Throughout the Writing Box project, I chose to adapt Graves' writing process model to create a "writing process fit for a child" (Edwards & Maloy, 1992). This child-centered writing process has the following elements:

Prewriting. I did not ask children to write without the children and I first setting a context or a framework for their writing. Typically, the introduction of a writing activity to children is called a "writing prompt" or a "mini-lesson" by elementary school teachers and some writing specialists. Other educators use the term "lead" or "launch" to describe the use of a read aloud, a conversation, or a look at someone's writing to start a writing lesson.

I have found that the terms "prompt," "mini-lesson," and "lead" inadequately describe ways to introduce writing activities to young writers. "Prompt" suggests a stimulus-response model (teacher prompts student—student responds in the direction suggested by the teacher) that greatly oversimplifies how young children decide what they are going to write. "Mini-lesson" defines the teacher as an instructor who will show the student what to write and how to write it—particularly the language mechanics of punctuation, spelling, paragraphing or story leads. "Lead" or "launch" implies that it is the teacher's role to select a resource or conduct a discussion about a writing genre or topic, leading students to where the teacher wants them to go.

For me, the term "openings" or "openers" is a far more vibrant and interesting way to describe the prewriting phase of a writing process fit for a child. The goal is not to prompt, instruct or direct, but to open up the imaginations of young writers; to find ways for children to tap into a wide array of creative possibilities by choosing a form of self-expression that communicates their ideas to others through written language. Openers generate fresh writing

possibilities, sometimes never before considered or tried by the children or the teacher.

Many activities serve as effective openers for young writers: read alouds of children's literature or silent reading by individuals; other children's writing shown as examples in books or on overheads; discussions among the children and the teacher about writing ideas and genres; storytelling; my own writing read aloud and discussed; videos such as *Reading Rainbow* that relate to the ideas and genres being talked about; open-ended computer software, for example, *Kid Pix* (1992) or *Creative Writer* (1993). These strategies can be used singularly or in combination with one another.

Openers build mental frameworks for thinking about writing. In some instances, children may decide to try a version of what another writer (adult or child) has done. This is not viewed as copying someone else's work; rather, it is seen as a way to compose a different version of the same idea. At other times, children use the opener to start a piece of writing that is new and original for them.

Drafting. Young children need time and encouragement to create a first draft of a piece of writing. For me, developing different strategies to support children in generating a draft became a central part of a writing process fit for a child. Writing is always an act of discovery. Children need to spend enough time with a writing project to see where their ideas are going to take them. Young writers, like all writers, will experience the feeling of not knowing what they are going to write till they write it. They often create something they did not expect as they construct their initial drafts.

Supporting children's acts of discovery is essential to developing their writing. Youngsters can become blocked at many points in their efforts to write. They may be reluctant to try a specific idea or genre; they may be stopped by not knowing how to spell certain words; they may be distracted or intimidated by other children in the class; they may have had few or no positive experiences with writing prior to school. Each of these factors serve to disrupt the writing process, keeping the writer from writing. When blocked, little material gets down on paper. Ideas generated by a creative opener are lost. A sense of frustration or fear is revealed by statements such as "I do not know what to write" or "I hate writing."

To support children in writing a draft, I have found myself as the teacher needing to step into a different role, that of "writing coach." Coaching writing involves finding ways to unblock the creative ideas of young writers. It means restoring or sustaining a sense of confidence that the writer has something important to communicate that other people, including the teacher/writing coach, want to read or hear. It means doing whatever is needed to maintain the writing process and to assist the writer in getting some of her or his ideas down on paper.

For many teachers, coaching writing is an unfamiliar and unexpected role. Traditionally, teachers have been final product editors. They evaluate their students' writing against adult-like standards of correctness and meaningfulness. Coaching, by contrast, involves supporting the writer while writing. This may include discussing ideas, taking dictation for the writer, sharing the pencil in a co-writing model, finding new writing materials to energize the project, demonstrating the use of conventions of written language, or whatever it takes to support a young writer in generating as much of a written draft as the writer and

the coach choose to do at that time. In a writing process fit for a child, the coach's unswerving focus is to facilitate writing in ways that engage children enjoyably while constantly reinforcing their desire to write again.

Supporting young writers in generating a working draft of a piece of writing is consistent with a whole language view that it is essential to teach writing as a "whole to part" rather than a "part to whole" process. Traditional writing models have emphasized the teaching of separate skills to be mastered through drill and practice activities before personal writing projects are to be undertaken. In other words, children must first learn the conventions (letter formation, spelling, punctuation, complete sentences) before they can express their own ideas in substantive pieces of writing.

Whole language advocates emphasize the necessity of generating a meaningful whole piece of writing as the basis for subsequent discussions about the conventions of written language. For effective whole to part learning to proceed, it is necessary that children construct more or less whole pieces of writing from which ongoing discussions about writing and its meaning and intent can proceed. I have consistently seen children pay more attention to learning the conventions of written language if they are discussing their own ideas and thinking about how to communicate those ideas to others. If the writing is not personally meaningful to young writers, the boredom factor heightens considerably, creating distracted attention in learning and diminished commitment to becoming deeply involved in exploring their creative ideas.

Revising and Editing. Revising and editing writing gives young writers the opportunity to make changes in both the meaning and structure of their writing. As youngsters read over their texts and reflect on what they want to say,

they are engaging in a process of revising and editing. Revising may include adding to or deleting from what is already written, and sometimes starting an entire new piece of writing. Revising can also mean making the decision not to change what has been written. In a writing process fit for a child, decisionmaking about change rests with the author, after discussions with the teacher, and sometimes other members of the class.

A key to revising and editing is feedback and a sense of audience for the writing. Young writers benefit from feedback. As Allen and Allen (1996, p. 1) point out: "Our behavior changes most powerfully when feedback is given and received in a positive environment where trial and error is encouraged."

Working from this important principle of human motivation, I try to build many occasions for feedback into classroom writing activities.

Feedback does not necessarily or always involve the children listening to what the teacher has to say about their writing. Indeed, too much feedback from the teacher may distort how young writers are responding to their text. They may feel as though they need to please the teacher rather than communicate the ideas and pictures in their heads. I try to create ways for young writers to give feedback to other young writers. Often this happens effectively in a small group. Together we discuss what has been written and our reactions to it. We give compliments in a positive, affirming manner to the writer about what we like in the writing as well as ask questions or make suggestions about meaning and intent. Each author can then use or not use the group feedback in decisions about revision.

Feedback in revision and editing is also connected to the idea of audiences for writing. I distinguish some writing as being for the writer alone and not for an

audience of other people. Some writing is clearly intended to be read or heard by a wider audience. We discuss who the writing is for and what ideas the author is hoping to communicate to the readers and listeners. Thinking about an audience becomes a key element of the writing process because it asks young writers to make an assessment as to whether what they have written will be understood in the way they want it understood by the people who read it or hear it.

Discussing audience is a delicate balancing act for the teacher. Writers need to be able to fully and confidently express their ideas in print, and some young children write mostly for themselves. It is essential not to short-circuit creative self-expression by introducing too much information about how other people are reacting to what is being written. At the same time, talking about changing one's writing by revising the content or editing the form and structure requires honest clarification about why such changes need to happen.

Deciding when children ought to change the spelling of words from invented to conventional or book spelling is an example of a teacher's complex role in revision and editing. Children need to see that standard spelling is not just a rule-driven procedure that one gets wrong or right, but a way for more readers and listeners to understand what has been written. The writer learns that one authentic reason to revise and edit is so that more people can read your writing.

Publishing. Publishing children's writing is the culmination of a writing process fit for a child. It brings the writing full circle from a creative "opener," through drafting, revising and editing, to sharing the writing with readers and listeners. It is essential to give young writers a sense of completeness and closure to their writing project. Publishing involves celebrating the writing with others. Without publishing, writing remains a private experience, lacking the feedback of

others and the self-satisfaction of communicating ideas to an audience. Although not every piece of writing needs to be published, I ensure that every writer in the classroom has many opportunities to regularly publish writing during the school year.

I utilize numerous strategies for publishing children's writing. One popular format is child-made books that go into the classroom or school library as well as family collections of children's writing. Children construct their own books by designing a cover page, authoring a version of a story with words and pictures, deciding when that story is ready to be published, and including an "About the Author" page. Sometimes these books remain in children's invented spelling and punctuation; sometimes they are word processed to provide book spellings of text; sometimes children's spellings and book spellings appear together in the final published format. I emphasize choice and decisionmaking by children in determining the format of child-made books.

Other publishing strategies emphasize different ways to showcase children's work in the classroom. The "Before Noon News" serves as a daily publishing format for all kinds of writing. "Magic Poetry Pot" presents children's poetry in an exciting oral tradition. A class-made alphabet is prominently displayed on one wall, children's signs are hung for all to read, student-designed mailboxes are in view on the bathroom door, and children's own lists are posted to tell which kids are to feed fish and insects.

Displaying writing in places where it can be readily seen by members of the larger school community is another way to publish. I hang writing on classroom walls and bulletin boards as well as out in the hallway for everyone in the school to see. In order to allow families and other school staff to read the

children's writing, I put some in the Mark's Meadow memo that goes home to every family every other week. One year, we produced our own classroom newspaper featuring children's writing and it was sent home with all of the children in the classroom.

Classroom computers also publish writing innovatively. *Creative Writer* (1993) and *Fine Artist* (1993) let kids create comics, newspapers and letters in interesting visual forms. Davidson's *Kid Works 2* (1992) reads aloud a child's writing in a computer voice. *Kid Pix* (1992) lets children type their stories along with illustrations, either to publish a hard copy through the printer or to put in filmstrip frames to make a movie of the story to be read aloud in kids' voices.

Conclusion 5: Exploring Multiple Genres

Writing Boxes created a momentum for exploring different genres with young writers and led to the development of new strategies for teaching poetry, fiction writing, nonfiction writing, and various forms of public and private communications. As the students and I explored these, long-standing teaching methods in my classroom changed dramatically.

Before the Writing Box project, teaching multiple genres had been an ancillary rather than a primary focus of my language arts curriculum for two reasons. First, historically the school system provided only a general outline of the types of writing experiences first and second graders must have during the school year. I emphasized the reading and literary study parts of the curriculum which explore genres through reading. These were more developed expectations on the part of the district.

Second, my beliefs about teaching language defined reading as more important and appropriate for first and second graders. I assumed that children were too young to write much poetry or to discuss the ways to use fiction and nonfiction within a piece of writing. I regarded use of genres as teaching topics for older writers who could produce more adult-like versions of poems and stories. I did not regard teaching multiple genres as a way to meet the school district's expectation of children learning to read and spell.

As writing process theory has influenced the school system's reading and writing curriculum, the expectations for what every student should write has become more specific. According to the latest Core Curriculum Guide for Grades K-6 (Amherst & Pelham Public Schools, 1995, pp. 8, 5), first and second grade students should write or publish "personal experience narratives," an "imaginative story," a "personal observation report," "letters/invitations," and "poems." Broadly, it is expected that children will use writing "to convey information," "for pleasure," "to connect reading to writing," "to develop skills," and "to recognize various cultures and lifestyles." As I developed new writing approaches, I was also responding to increased district expectations of connecting writing to children's learning.

As the Writing Box project has evolved over the years, I have steadily increased and extended my study of genres of written language. Acrostics have been a very effective starting point for exploring poetry because students write them creatively and imaginatively. Name acrostics have proven to be very popular as have single or multiple word acrostics where children choose the word(s) that interest them.

Writing acrostics has opened ways for children to explore other types of poetry—two voice, haiku, and concrete, to name three forms of poetic communication that I have added to my curriculum over the past four years. I also read poetry to children regularly, and the children request poetry when given an option of what to hear during read aloud time. I include many wonderful poems in other parts of the curriculum; for example, weather poems to enhance the “Earth Changes” science unit and math poems to explain key concepts such as addition and subtraction.

An examination of fiction and nonfiction concepts has been integrated into my writing study of language arts. Two activities I call “True Tales/Tall Tales,” and “Spiced Up Stories” successfully introduce ways to combine fiction with facts in personal narratives and imaginative writing. The children write two narratives—one accurate and factual; the other make-believe and sometimes wildly fantastic. They read these pieces aloud and then ask the audience about each one, “Who thinks this one is true?” “Who thinks this one is false?” After a vote by the members of the audience, the author reveals which story is which.

Fiction-nonfiction writing promotes a dialog with the children about what is real and what is unreal in a story. They learn how an author’s use of language allows her or him to “spice up” a piece of writing by adding fictional details and imaginative descriptions to a factual event. As they compose their own stories, they are developing a greater understanding of how to use fact and fiction in writing, and how audiences respond to imaginative or fantastic features in a story.

Learning about the concepts of fiction and nonfiction has become a year-long topic of conversation in the classroom. At the beginning of the year, I look for opportunities to introduce how authors present “fictionalized facts” and

“factualized fictions” in their writing. Sometimes, a child’s first piece of school writing serves as a way for me to introduce fiction and nonfiction. Young writers blend fiction and nonfiction quite easily and naturally (often without consciously intending to do so), making this easy to point out. Identifying how a child has used facts and fictions leads discussions of how a writer might purposefully make part of a story fantastic, imaginative, or factually accurate.

Two other writing exercises further explore fiction and nonfiction concepts with young writers. “Real and Make-Believe” menus are a much-enjoyed feature of the daily Before Noon News classroom meeting time. The children create alternative versions of the daily lunch menu, some slightly different from the actual bill of fare and some wildly amusing or totally improbable. Daily menu writing offers an ongoing opportunity to talk about language as well as how writers create desired responses on the part of readers and listeners. The children are quick to suggest words and phrases that will get an audience to laugh, to feel “grossed out,” or to wonder which version of the menu is correct.

“Imaginary Products and Commercial Messages” is a second way to explore how to use fiction and nonfiction in writing. The children, usually in groups, and sometimes in collaboration with their adult writing partners, design advertisements for imaginary or hypothetical products. Using their wide experience with commercials seen on television or in magazines and newspapers, the children devise entertaining and imaginative product ideas and messages. As the ads are drawn, written and then shared with the class, wide-ranging discussions are possible about language, media images, and the accuracy of commercial claims. The children already know how some manufacturers and

advertisers use language to blend together actual events with made-up scenes to promote a particular product.

In contrast to make-believe menus and imaginary products, “I Wonder” journals extend the study of fiction and nonfiction concepts while also introducing the goals and purposes of research and report writing. At the beginning of the school year, I introduce the idea of an “I Wonder” journal in which children write questions they want to answer about personally interesting topics. Typically, these questions relate to the world around them, and form a natural connection to how scientists study phenomena and draw conclusions based on their observations.

Gradually, the idea of children’s “I Wonder” questions, scientific investigations, and personal theorizing are linked into the classroom study of the school district’s required science units—“Earth Changes,” “Seeds,” “Sink and Float,” “Magnets,” and “Growth and Development.” We talk about how science writers communicate their questions, investigations and theories to other people through written communications. Research and report writing is defined as a way to share what you have learned using words, pictures, numbers and other symbols. We discuss how imaginative and fantastic ideas and images in fictional writing make it possible for an audience to fully enjoy the story. In contrast, for observation and personal report writing, accuracy of information and clarity of presentation are needed for readers and listeners to understand and learn from what has been written.

“I Wonder” journals also become a way to talk about how scientists or other experts decide something is “true.” I point out how information that was long thought to be true is now regarded as not true; for example, the old belief

that dinosaurs were slow-moving, relatively unintelligent creatures whose inability to adapt to changing conditions caused their extinction is not now current thinking. Scientists are revising their views of dinosaurs as new information is discovered. Scientific “truth” is always being rewritten in the light of new evidence.

The study of multiple genres has been part of the development of another feature of the Writing Box project—“writing across the curriculum.” As children become familiar with poetry, fiction and nonfiction concepts, and research and report writing, it has become possible to integrate writing into other parts of the curriculum. My classroom now features writing in mathematics, science, and social studies in ways that never happened prior to the Writing Boxes. The children do not wait for a formally scheduled writing time to express their ideas in written language. An activity in mathematics, science or social studies, for example, may feature a writing genre or format we discussed during language arts. Unexpectedly, I find children using poetic images, imaginative fiction, or descriptive explanations as they communicate their ideas to others.

Following the interest of the children in writing, I have started to develop ways to include specific writing activities in mathematics. “Math comics” let children create their own story within a comic strip format while also including mathematical information that they are studying; for example, wholes and halves; fractions; addition and subtraction. Many elements of writing are used within math comics. They invite fictional storytelling and creative self-expression while simultaneously asking writers to demonstrate their knowledge of mathematical concepts. Math comics are a relatively new idea that I have not used a great deal,

but from the children's enjoyment of combining mathematics with writing, this activity shows great promise as a way to increase writing across the curriculum.

Conclusion 6: Technology Promotes Writing

Computers and other forms of technology promote not only children's writing, but new forms of curriculum and instruction as well. Over the years, the technology base in my classroom has been continually expanding. For the past two years, I have used three computers, two GeoSafaris, electronic spellers, tape recorders, and a television with a VCR as part of daily instruction. Based on my experiences with multiple sources of technology used as an ongoing part of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies teaching, I offer the following observations about how first and second graders use technology in writing:

First, young children quickly incorporate computers into their learning activities. Adult guidance and previous proficiency with technology is not necessary for children to feel as though they can learn from computers. Generally, the children interact with the technology by choice. Occasionally, I decide that someone will try a particular machine to do a particular project. The children easily pair up on the machines irrespective of gender, age, language spoken, or knowledge of the technology. They take turns, share the machines, and work together productively to help each other learn.

Second, I must allow children lots of time to explore the possibilities offered by technology before insisting on or demanding specific products or results. The power of computers for accomplishing learning is so vast, so creative, and so far beyond what humans can accomplish with paper and books. To

fashion education for the future, teachers must learn how to use the power of technology to develop the potential of every learner by watching how youngsters explore and enjoy computers and other machines.

Third, integrating computers into the classroom has enabled me to structure more small groups, cooperative projects, and multiple activity centers. I do less whole group instruction and more small group activities to keep children at the computers all day long. At times in my room, one fourth of the class might be learning on the three computers simultaneously. I make computers available for all children to use individually and in groups. My intent is to increase learning, not to provide a reward for good behavior or finished seatwork.

Fourth, children need computer software and CD-ROMs that promote self-propelled learning. These electronic materials invite learning through the same characteristics that Maria Montessori designed into all of her teaching materials a century ago—first, a point of interest that draws children's attention, and second, self-correction so children can learn without an adult present. Point of interest and self-correction invite repeated learning experiences; children build layer upon layer of knowledge through regular encounters with hardware and software. This is why it is essential that software be open-ended, challenging, self-directing and worthy of repeated use by children. When computer software replicates workbooks and coloring books, their learning potential is reduced; they are not using Montessori's principles to stimulate the best learning that children can accomplish.

Fifth, computers facilitate all elements of a writing process from brainstorming to drafting to editing to publishing. In young writers, they promote curiosity, questioning, a determination to find things out, and a decision to

challenge oneself. Computers are an electronic Writing Box—an equal opportunity learning tool, inviting all children to communicate their ideas through writing, regardless of whether or not the teacher judges that child to be highly skilled with language.

APPENDIX

CHILDREN'S WRITING SAMPLES

PIEZ BIME THE WITE
FLOWER TO DO THE,
X5 PRAMT
AND
FOOD DYES

NAME JESSENIA

ANDREA

MAXA Please buy me the white flower to do this
experiment and food dyes

9

Figure 4.1. Reminder to Ms. Edwards.

DO NOT
TOUCH
DO NOT
TOUCH. ~~DO NOT~~

Figure 4.2. Do not touch sign.

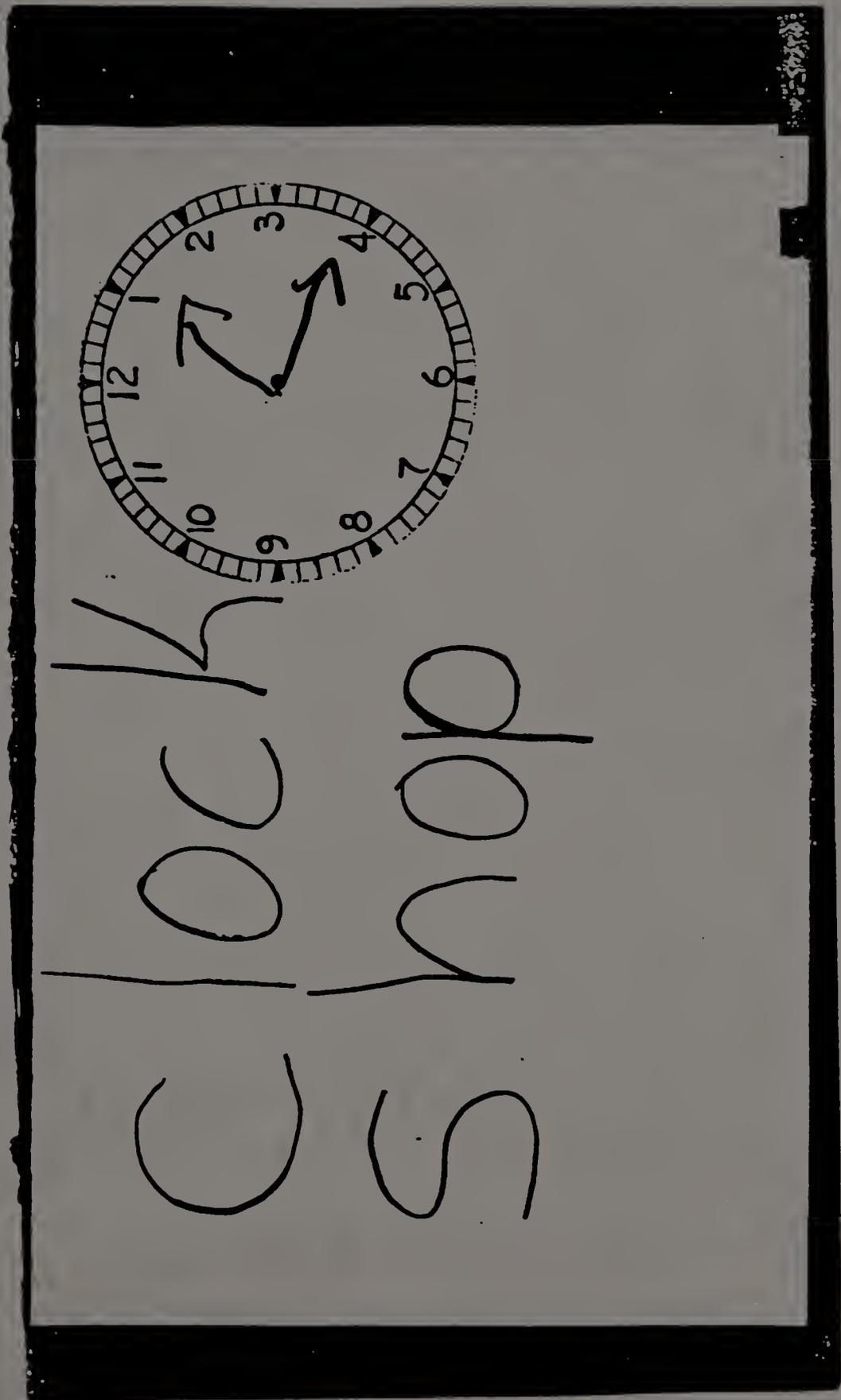


Figure 4.3. Clock shop sign.

Watches
and clocks
for sale
There

free

Figure 4.4. Wrist watch sign.

IN Puerto Rico It is
 80s
 The gives and
 in the inside
 it is the 70s OL SO
 in her it is the 40s

In Puerto Rico it is 80s degrees and in the
 in the inside it is the 70s. Also, in here,
 (Massachusetts) it is the 40s.

Figure 4.5. Weather report.

today's real menu
 is Pizza whipped
 Potatoes Juice
 Worms milk slug
 Fried chicken
 slugs Pie
 and chicken
 nuggets
 Enema

FEB 10 1993
 FEB 10 1993
 FEB 10 1993

Today's real menu is pizza, whipped potatoes, juice, worms milk, slugs, fried chicken, slugs pie, and chicken nuggets

Figure 4.6. Fantasy menu.

Today is menu is
Shcken Nagits
and SALET Bar
and For Dessert
Nak Nak
Hus Dar I
Sed. Hus Dar
it is ~~B~~ATMAN

Today's menu is chicken nuggets and salad bar and for dessert
Knock, knock . . . Who's there? I said, "Who's there?"
It is Batman.

Figure 4.7. Realistic menu.

Rosa Parks
on a riding
Seat on kind
a sity bus

Rosa Parks
on a
seat riding
a un kind
sity bus

Figure 4.8. Birthday card to Rosa Parks.

BY E.J. GOPE

I F YOU STAND BY I MIGHT KISS YOU

L OVE YOU AND HUG YOU, AND

O OH I MIGHT MARRY YOU

VARY SOON VARY SOON

EVEN RATE NOW

C YOU MAKE ME HAPPY
O YOU ARE MAGNIFICENT
WOW! I CHANGED MY MIND

If you stand by me I might kiss you
love you and hug you and
oh I might marry you
very soon, very soon
even right now
you make me happy
oh you are magnificent
uck! I changed my mind

Figure 4.9. I love you poem.

Sunday
a day off from school

Monday

Tuesday

I go to gymnastics

Wednesday

Thursday

a plain school day

Friday

Saturday

tomorrow it begins again.

Sunday
off from school

Monday

School begins again

Tuesday

gymnastics

wednesday

school is short

Thursday

Friday

the school weekend

Saturday

- by

Leah

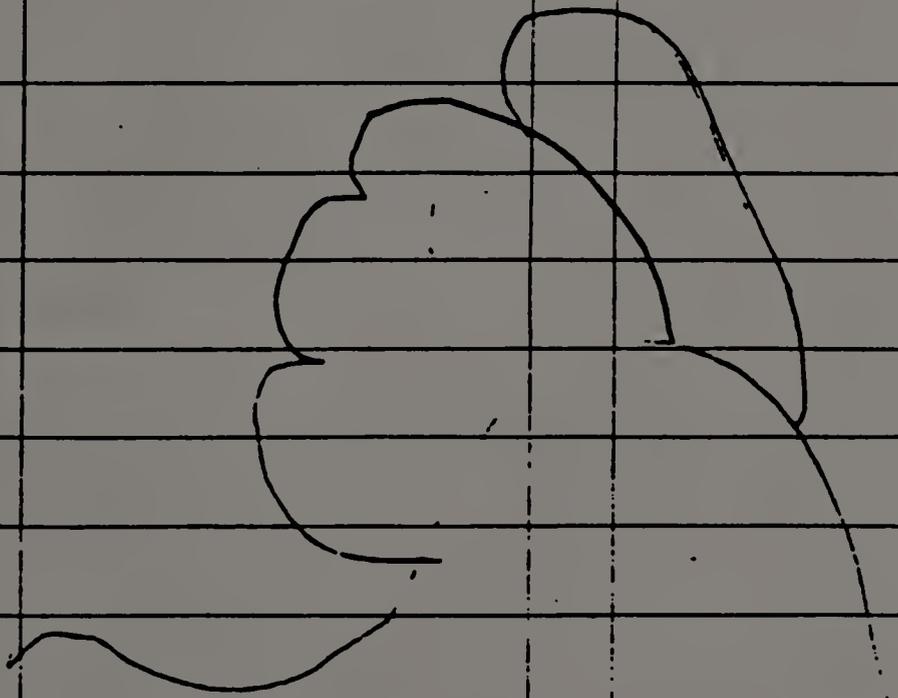
Clark

10-23-95



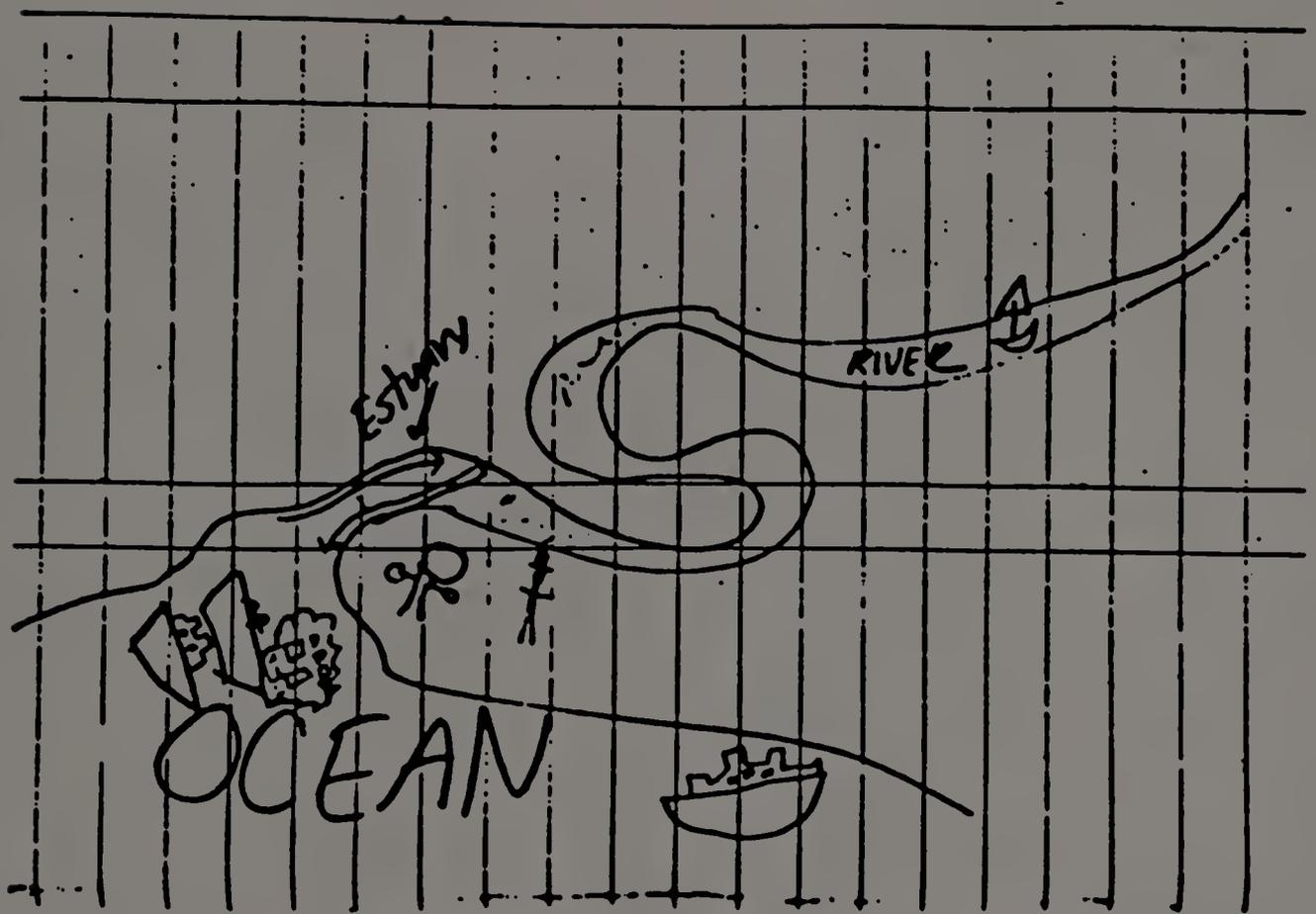
Figure 4.10. Two-voice poem.

I wonder. How
River water turns in
to salt water



I wonder how river water turns into salt water.

Figure 4.11. "I Wonder" journal entry.



It mixes with FRESH WATER WHICH IS
 THE SALT WATER
 RIVER WATER.

It—the salt water—mixes with fresh water which is river water.
 OCEAN—ESTUARY—RIVER

Figure 4.12. "I Wonder" journal entry.

names	yes	no	
Tessenia	★		11
fanzi	★		10
TASHINA	♡		9
GODFREY	♡		8
Marxam	♡		7
Neda	♡		6
KO		★	5
MS. EDW.	★		4
TUNWAUN	★		3
Josephine	♡		2
AMY	✓		1
			yes no

DO YOU LIKE ICE CREAM?

name

Do you like ice cream?

Figure 4.13. A child's survey.

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