

AN INVESTIGATION INTO FAMILY MESSAGE JOURNALS

WITH GRADE 1 WRITERS

By

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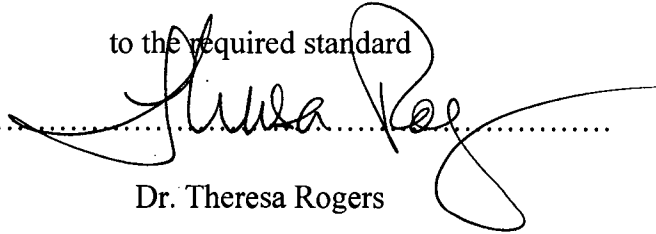
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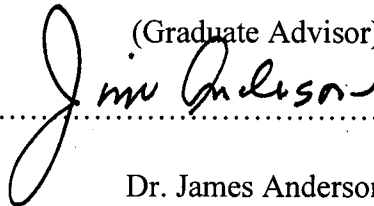
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to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of my research was to investigate family message journals as a method to improve students' writing where students were motivated by a sense of audience and family involvement. I was curious to investigate the extent to which students' writing would improve over time using an authentic audience, based on classroom instruction that used a genre approach and a shared writing experience. The sources of data included writing samples, anecdotal observations, and a parent survey. The study gave further evidence for the research previously completed by Wollman-Bonilla (2001a; 2001b), Derewianka (2003), Chapman, (1995), Dyson (2003), and Frank (1992), that by using this context: (1) students showed improvements in their writing in comparison of the first and last messages (early and late writing samples), (2) students showed an improved sense of audience awareness, (3) family involvement was a necessary component in this process. This study gives support for a writing method that primary teachers can use when considering ways to involve family members and their conversations within the classroom.

Jan. 15, 2010
 Dear mom and Dad
 we tokt abot the
 inthquake in Hati.
 I felt sad for them
 but Roans gampa is
 helping thos pepl.
 Love Erin 

Jan 17, 2010
 Dear Erin,
 It is very sad to see all the
 people in Haiti without homes,
 food or clean water. We are
 lucky to have people like Roan's
 grandpa that are able to help.
 We are very proud of you for
 donating your allowance this week
 at Tim Hortons for the people
 in Haiti.
 Love
 Mommy and Daddy

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Figures, Tables, Appendixes.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Introduction.....	7
Research Question.....	8
Literature Review.....	8
Genre Based Approach to Writing.....	8
Shared Writing Experience.....	11
Writing for an Authentic Audience.....	11
Parental Involvement and Family Replies.....	13
Summary.....	15
Methodology.....	16
Research Design.....	16
Research Site.....	17
Participants.....	18
Data Collection: The Family Message Journal Program.....	19
Data Sources.....	22
Writing samples.....	22
Parent survey.....	23
Observations.....	23

Data Analysis.....	24
Writing samples.....	24
Parent survey.....	26
Observations.....	27
Findings.....	27
Meaning, Length and Use of Inventive Spelling.....	27
Audience Awareness.....	29
Family Replies.....	34
Parental Support.....	35
Discussion.....	36
Role of a Genre Approach.....	37
Sense of Audience Awareness.....	37
Family Involvement.....	38
Limitations.....	38
Further Research.....	39
Final Reflections	40
References.....	41
Appendix.....	43

List of Tables

Table 1: Meaning of Messages (based on early and late writing samples).....	28
Table 2: Students' Message Purposes (based on Halliday's Functions of Language).....	30
Table 3: Message Purposes over time (based on Halliday's Function Language).....	32

List of Figures

Figure 1. Karen's procedural message on making rain.....	21
Figure 2. An example of an early writing sample and parent reply.....	22
Figure 3. Karen's message that negotiated two genres into one letter.....	31
Figure 4. Tony's apology message.....	33

List of Appendixes

Appendix A: Grade 1 Writing from Experience Performance Standards.....	43
Appendix B: Codings for Writing Samples and Family Replies.....	44
Appendix C: Example of Writing Data Collected.....	45
Appendix D: Parent Survey.....	46

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Introduction

Emergent writing has been a fascinating topic of interest. Moving from my readings of Dyson's (2003) book which transformed my understandings of how children recontextualized personal cultural references into their writings, to my developing understanding of Halliday's (1985) functional grammar and the First Steps Writing Resource book (2008), I incorporated the genre approach and shared writing experiences into my classroom. Teaching at a new school in a middle class neighbourhood, I was keen to utilize the families as a resource to build upon my students' literacy development. With a continued focus on improving children's writing beyond contrived situations (framed sentences and narratives on weekend/past events), I designed a study to observe how emergent writing would progress using the students' families as an authentic audience. My developing understanding of systematic guided writing instruction (Derewianka, 2003; First Steps, 2008) and shared writing experiences (Routman, 2005) became the context behind how I strived to improve my students' writings.

With a focus on explicit instruction to develop conventions and behaviours of writing, it was my hope that introducing audience awareness through a family message journal would have many positive results: it would allow for weekly communication about school experiences, where the students would respond in a letter format, and the families would reply back with immediate feedback; it would provide parents with a progression of students' writing development; it would allow writing to become a tool for reviewing what was learned; it would introduce students to various genres and allow them to recontextualize other genres within a letter format; and most importantly, it

would allow students an opportunity to write for an authentic audience and develop a purposeful sense of writing in real contexts.

Research Question

Based on my beliefs about how students learn to write, my study explores whether using family message journals improves students' writing within a classroom context that uses a genre based and shared writing approach. Specifically, I investigated to what extent grade one students' writing improved using an authentic audience. Below, I will review the literature I used to develop a framework for the study. It is important to note that writing is a complex art. It is the result of many different thought-processes coming together, none of which can truly be separated. Children's writings are, in fact, sociocognitive constructions (Chapman, 1995). As this study will investigate, classroom instruction, parental involvement and students' understanding of language are all interconnected as children learn to write.

Literature Review

Genre Based Approach to Writing

It is important to look at why I have chosen to use a letter format to teach writing. Based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Derewianka, 2003) and the genre based instructional approach, teaching students different genres serves specific learning and communication purposes valued in their culture (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000; Wyatt-Smith, 1997). Halliday argued that language structure reflects the social uses language is for (Keenan, 1975). In his first article titled 'Relevant Models of Language', he focused on language development in children and proposed that language develops in response to the personal and social needs of a child (Keenan, 1975). He suggested these needs are:

instrumental (language is used to satisfy some material need), regulatory (language is used to regulate the behaviour of others), interactional (language is used to maintain and transform social relationships), personal (language is used to express individual identity and personality), heuristic (language is used to investigate a speaker's environment), imaginative (language is used in fantasy and play) and representational (language is used to express propositions). The characteristics that Halliday identified in each of his seven functions can be adapted to children's writing and help to identify the social practices that children are writing for and their understanding of language (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000).

Common in Australia, the genre based instructional approach also has similarities to Vygotsky's approach to learning, "language is learned through guidance and interaction in the context of shared experience" (Derewianka, 2003, p. 143). As Bakhtin, a literary theorist pointed out, genres are socially constructed and provide signals that allow a speaker/writer and listener/reader to interpret the text and are "not just empty forms" (Morson, 1991, as cited by Chapman, 1995, p. 167). Wyatt-Smith (1997) and Derewianka (2003), who reviewed research on genres, theorized that texts must be viewed as a whole in order to identify their social purpose and gain insight into the relationship between the text and the context. Furthermore, "learning the genres of one's culture is a necessary part of becoming a participant in the culture" (Christie & Rothery, 1989b, as cited by Wyatt-Smith, 1997, p. 15).

Using the gradual release of responsibility model, students are guided through the demands of the genre and gain control of the genre (Derewianka, 2003). In doing so, students expand on their knowledge of both language and society's purposes for specific texts. As researchers and educators who have applied the genre theory have identified,

teachers must provide daily opportunities for students to write in different genres beyond the narrative, teach the linguistic features associated with each genre (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001), and allow for individual choice and creativity.

Writing in a family message journal allows students to be involved in other types of writing, and provides an example of the different kinds of writing that people do in their everyday lives outside of school (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001b). There are many counter arguments for using a genre based approach, including that teaching a genre can become like a formula where students complete discrete skills. In fact, teachers need to emphasize that there is variation within any genre (Derewianka, 2003). Teachers can assign topics that allow for children's interests and self-expression (Derewianka, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001a). In the case of writing a letter, students are learning various communication modes. Not only is the purpose of letters to socialize, they can also be used to describe, to instruct, to entertain and to recount. Therefore, any genre can be flexible and can be "recontextualized by a writer to serve new purposes" (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001b, p. 169). As Chapman (1995) noted in her study on the socioconstruction of written genres, teachers who provide models and make more forms accessible, give students more freedom and enable them to appropriate those genres into their writing. But in order to learn new genres, students need feedback on their efforts and they need text models created in shared writing experiences (Routman, 2005; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001a).

Shared Writing Experience

Drawing from social theorists, literacy researcher and educator, Regie Routman (2005) acknowledges that in a shared writing experience, the teacher and the students work collaboratively to create a text. This demonstration of writing can later become part of the students' reading. In shared writing, the teacher acts as the expert and scribes for the students while using think alouds to demonstrate how to create a meaningful text (Routman, 2005). The focus is on both the craft of writing and the conventions, with an emphasis on the content to create a meaningful, interesting message. While still demonstrating correct form, capitalization, punctuation and grammar, the writer focuses on the intention. The teacher should paraphrase and expand on students' thinking and demonstrate what cohesive writing sounds and looks like (Routman, 2005). According to Routman (2005), shared writing lessons should include: 1) selecting a meaningful topic, 2) saying the words as the teacher writes, 3) shaping students' language, 4) moving along quickly, 5) looking for opportunities for all students to participate, 6) stopping and rereading. Finally, she recommends that in partners, students read the work and ask themselves if it makes sense and/or if anything needs to be changed. This shared writing jumpstarts students' own reading and writing processes, while also modeling and reinforcing the process of writing. Routman's (2005) method informed the method I employed to model letter writing within the family message journals.

Writing for an Authentic Audience

The aims for using family message journals are numerous. Using these journals, students will become constructors of their own language. Their competence should increase as they gain control over the purpose of the text (Routman, 2005). These

journals, first studied by Wollman-Bonilla (2001a), provide an ideal context for audience awareness because they utilize a responsive audience for children's writings.

In addition to Routman's work (2005), other literary researchers (Chapman, 1995; Dyson, 2003) indicate writing is a collectively constructed process. Dyson's (2003) study documenting the writing development of six African American students, reinforced how childhood culture enriches learning and in particular, written language development. When teachers create a supportive environment that values student motivation (hence writing for an audience) and choice, writing can flourish in ways that teachers could never predict. Further, in her analysis of the classroom activities, Dyson (2003) found that students were driven to perform for their peers and their teacher. Even these young students were intimately aware of how to create writing for effect. Whether it was to tell a story, to sing a song, to make them laugh or to teach them something, writing for an audience gave these students further motivation.

Similarly, Frank (1992), who studied grade 5 students and their use of an authentic audience, found that when students had a sense of who they were communicating with, they were able to use rhetorical moves that addressed their audience's perceived beliefs. This included adjusting the language, length, and strategies of appeal in their texts (Frank, 1992). The students were able to edit advertisements for a third grade audience and an adult so that each set of readers could identify the intended audience of each text (Frank, 1992). As Frank (1992) describes, writing for an authentic audience can transform students' intentions.

Furthermore, writing for an authentic audience is far different than writing to a teacher. Real audiences show the true potential or power of communication (Wollman-

Bonilla, 2001a). Using a family message journal establishes a purpose for students (Routman, 2005) and encourages students to anticipate the readers' needs. Wollman-Bonilla (2001a), who looked at whether primary students could develop audience awareness, found that emergent writers in a context characterized by an authentic response addressed their audience directly and drew upon the understandings of their readers' needs and concerns. All of these studies (Dyson, 2003; Frank 1992; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001a) indicate that students appeared highly motivated when writing for a real, authentic audience that responded immediately, not an imaginary audience from which a reply was never received. It is important to note that students were aided by the teacher's instruction and guidance which prompted them in how to consider their audience.

Parental Involvement and Family Replies

As teachers consider who students are writing for, family members can be seen as an excellent audience. Parental involvement in writing development is one way to bridge school and home environments (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001b). Many studies highlight the link between linguistically rich home environments and school success (Jordon, Snow & Porche, 2000; Pahl & Kelly, 2005; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001b). When schools put substantial effort into establishing partnerships with families, there is greater potential for academic success (Edwards, 1995 as cited by Jordon, Snow & Porche, 2000, p. 539). Continuing the foundational work of Heath (1983), Jordon, Snow and Porche (2000) focused on parental involvement and early literacy skills and found that parents welcomed invitations to participate in promoting their children's school success. Parents' efforts may contribute to improved language skills, as Jordan, et al. (2000) note, "giving parents the skills to engage in richer and more challenging conversations may make a

unique contribution to children's development, and change the nature of familial conversational interactions in a wider variety of settings" (p. 539).

Family involvement in writing instruction appears to correlate with greater school success (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001b). Although families might not think what they are doing is important in terms of academic learning, their participation can involve instructional scaffolding and modeling of genre conventions (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001b). In her study, Wollman-Bonilla (2001b) analyzed family responses to students' writing and found that families modeled genres that were "uncommon in children's home and classroom reading experiences" (p. 187). Narrative texts might have been expected, but the genres employed were non-narrative, aligning with the true nature of daily communication in society. These families were also able to provide instructional feedback and guidance and able to adjust the content of their writing to the children's changing abilities (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001b).

Furthermore, literary researchers who posit the importance of creating a third space, also argue for parental involvement. These researchers (Pahl & Kelly, 2005) indicate that parents' involvement within a classroom can represent a "third space" between home and school allowing for parents and children to draw on both home and school discourses. Pahl and Kelly (2005) suggest that parents and children who collaborate on joint projects including storytelling, book making, creating visual artifacts and reading and writing activities, both benefit from such activities. This is similar to Dyson's (2003) work, which documented how students appropriated resources from their unofficial lives (including television, animated movies, sports teams, church and hip hop music, friends and family) into their writing or "official" school practices. While home,

school and popular culture are often seen as “separate spheres by parents and teachers, children operate in both spaces” (Hull & Schultz, 2002, as cited by Pahl & Kelly, 2005, p. 91). Providing activities that encourage home and school to co-exist allows for benefits at different levels (Pahl & Kelly, 2005). At the classroom level, parental involvement allows for day to day interaction with the home. At the school level, it allows for parents to be involved with the children’s school discourse. And at a broader level, it allows parents to develop partnerships that will create a collaborative approach to learning (Pahl & Kelly, 2005). In essence, involving families creates a “shared curriculum” (Pahl & Kelly, 2005, p. 96).

Summary

I have established a potentially useful framework to improve young children’s writings through the use of family message journals where families provide immediate responses to their children’s letters. With the help of cognitive and literary theorists such as Halliday, and writing researchers such as Dyson, Chapman, Routman, and Wollman-Bonilla, my study explores whether using family message journals improves students’ writing within a classroom context that uses a genre based shared writing approach. Specifically, I investigate to what extent my grade one students’ writing improves using an authentic audience. It is my hope this study will show that these messages and the families’ replies become reflections on activities that have transpired, observations that have taken place and genuine communication that relate to the outside conversations families have as indicative of Halliday’s model. Given this ‘scaffold’, grade one students’ writing should flourish.

Methodology

Research Design

Teacher research is motivated by a researcher's questions regarding teaching and learning. In this case, my voice as a teacher is at the heart of the questions (Lassonde, Ritchie & Fox, 2008). My study utilized action research. According to Lassonde, Ritchie and Fox (2008), action research is "a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the 'actor' in improving or refining his or her actions" (p. 8, as cited by Sagor, 2000, p. 3). The goals of action research are to create positive changes (Lassonde et al., 2008, p. 8 as cited by, Mills, 2000, p.6) and to find strategies to improve classroom practices (Hubbard & Power, 2003). The process I used is based on Sagor's (2005) steps for action research: selecting a focus, clarifying theories, identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results and taking informed action (as cited by Lassonde, Ritchie, & Fox, 2008, p.8). While much of my teaching has also included critical reflection, the difference between this and the teacher research I engaged in for this project, is that there is an investigation of practice that has a plan, a design and is carried out methodically for an intentional purpose (Lassonde et al, 2008, p.9). As should be the case of any action research, this study has informed my practices, and shown the limitations of teacher inquiry.

This study follows the protocol of a qualitative research design based on Creswell's (2003) definition. Qualitative research includes: emerging methods based on socially and historically constructed theories and patterns, open-ended questions,

different types of data, and text/image analysis (Creswell, 2003). One type of qualitative research is the case study, where the

researcher explores a program, an event, an activity or a process, of one or more individuals. The cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time. (Creswell, 2003 p. 15)

Below I will discuss my qualitative case study investigating whether family message journals will improve the writings of five purposefully selected grade one students, given the context of a shared writing experience and genre approach.

Research Site

This study took place in a large elementary school located in a new development of a large city on the west coast of Canada. The school opened in September 2009 with a population of 580 students from kindergarten to grade seven. The school had 25 divisions. The majority of the students were of European ancestry, but a small percentage of the population included students of Asian and Indian descent. Most students were from middle-class families, but some were from working class and upper-middle class backgrounds. The school had a policy of including students with special needs in regular classrooms. Language support teachers helped to assist students with identified learning needs, including English language learners, and students with learning disabilities. Due to the recent opening of the school, the formal “school initiatives” had not yet been established. However, the school had two foci during the year, to establish literacy and

social responsibility goals, and to involve the local community of parents and businesses. Throughout the year, the school held several different events, including a literacy night for the families. Parents were also invited into many classrooms to help in different ways. Family involvement was an important part of the school culture and the principal recognized its value in classroom life.

Participants

The study was implemented in a grade one class. There were 21 students, eleven boys and ten girls, aged five and six. All students and parents granted permission and participated in the classroom instruction and family message journal activities. The class had a range of knowledge about literacy, as would be typical of any grade one class. Some students were still learning the alphabet letter/sound relationships, while others were already using invented spelling and able to write a few sentences. I purposefully selected five focal children who represented this range. Three students I selected were emergent readers and writers, and were identified as needing extra support in literacy instruction at the beginning of grade one. They were pulled out four times per week for a 40 minute block to work with a specialized language support teacher. One of these three students needed specific support with learning to identify the letter names and sounds. The other two students selected were beginning readers and writers at the beginning of the school year. Of these five children, two were girls and three were boys. They all had siblings and were from middle class families with some stay-at-home mothers, and fathers in occupations ranging from firefighters to salesmen.

The classroom did not have an educational assistant, but at the beginning of the year, five students were pulled out for specialized instruction with reading and spelling. This classroom was different from the other three grade one classrooms in the school because it consisted of a job share. My partner worked Monday to Wednesday and I worked Thursday and Friday. Continuity of instruction was ensured by planning our units at the beginning of the year. Similar programs were used to teach language arts, including a morning message and phonics program to teach spelling and writing conventions, a sight word program, shared reading, read-alouds, guided reading, journal writing, and different writing prompts in response to literature. Writers' workshop, including narratives, nonfiction and poetry, was introduced in the third term. For this study, I implemented the Family Message journals, but my partner used other school journals on her days.

Data Collection: The Family Message Journal Program

Letters were sent home to the parents to explain how the Family Message would be implemented in the class. The importance of participation and value in writing to their children was emphasized. Students were told that they would be participating in weekly shared writing lessons. After each lesson, they would be asked to write a message home to their families about an experience that had taken place at school. A family member was asked to respond in writing to these messages and students were to return the journal the following day.

The study began in November 2009. For 11 weeks, I structured my lessons in the following format: a shared writing lesson, a think-pair-share brainstorm to encourage

discussion time for topics so students were well equipped with ideas, a 15 to 20 minute writing session where students worked at their desks and I circulated, followed by an author's chair, or partner-share. I observed all students during these writing periods for the duration of the study. My observations focused on anecdotal notes about my lesson, the students' choice of topics and certain decisions that students made in their writing.

As I indicated in the literature review, I utilized a shared writing experience (Routman, 2005) on topics related to students' learning experiences. The lessons often followed an activity in which the students had just participated (i.e., a science experiment). For the majority of writing sessions, I gave the students a choice of topics based on experiences in our class (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001b), but occasionally I selected the topic for them. Before the students wrote, the children and I brainstormed content ideas they could write about to their parents and then I modeled how to compose a letter based on their ideas (Routman, 2005). During this collaborative construction of a message, I focused on different parts of the grade one Language Arts Performance Standards for writing (2006) including meaning, style, form and conventions, and some writing traits including ideas, word choice and organization. Throughout the 11 weeks, I modeled how to express sentences, images, how to ask questions, how to start sentences in different ways, how to select more descriptive words, and how to organize the ideas with a topic sentence. I demonstrated conventions of writing but I did not emphasize it, as Routman (2005) indicated. Rather, I focused on creating an interesting message. While I composed an entire message for the first half of the study, the students were encouraged to write their own message and they rarely copied the example I created.

While I initially emphasized experiential writing (writing to recount, socialize and describe), in subsequent lessons I also introduced procedural writing utilizing Derewianka's (2003) model and 'Writing to Instruct' in the First Steps Writing Resource book (2008). For example, after a science experiment on making rain where the students participated in the event and related it to the water cycle, I modeled how to write the steps of the experiment. First, the students were asked to share the steps with a partner, and then with the students' help, I wrote the steps out on chart paper. I later modeled a letter using these instructions and then they were asked to tell their parents how to make rain. Included in this lesson were some language features associated with this genre. I structured the format similar to a recipe, with transition words such as "first, then, next" and included a topic sentence. While the class had participated in other lessons on directions, and ordering events, they had not yet been asked to write instructions in this way. Figure 1 shows an example of Karen's message after this lesson.

9
200
Now2

Dear Sistr

We Lrd ha w to mak
ran. cl tel you th Step
Step 1 frst you mak Steem
the you 1s And kd wdr
the you pt the hot wodn
on the jra w the you at
the pan ovr the Steem and
the haw you Mak ran
Love

Dear sis, We learned how to make rain. I'll tell you the steps. Step one, first you make steam. Then you [add] ice and cold water. Then you put the hot water on the [pan]. Then you put the pan over the steam and [that is] how you make rain.

Figure 1. Karen's procedural message on making rain.

While my design plans originally had included introducing other genres, given my two day job status and the emergent level of the students' writing, I elected to focus on genres to socialize, recount, describe and instruct, thus enacting my role as a reflective practitioner.

Data Sources

Sources of data consisted of writing samples from five focal students throughout the duration of the study, the results of a parent survey, and my personal observations of seven writing blocks which I recorded in my research journal. Below each data source is discussed.

Writing samples.

The primary source of data was the writing samples. I collected all the writing samples (52 in total) from the five focal students for the duration of the data collection period, as well as the 52 family replies. Figure 2 is an example of one of the first samples I collected from Karen, followed by the parent's reply.

Nov. 20

Dear Mom and Dad

we has bin lrring
a bat famys it is very
fun I hop you thik is
know to and we lrring
a bat awf and I lrring
the awf bat pelist
Love

Nov. 22

Dear

Wow! It sounds like you
are having fun learning about
families. Owls barfing. That's GROSS
Love, Mommy

Figure 2. An example of an early writing sample and parent reply.

The writing samples were photocopied and I rarely needed to write any comments or add words for the five focal students' samples. I was able to read all the messages, despite invented spelling and letter reversals typical of grade one students. Occasionally, I made a note to myself if students had omitted words and then added them as they read their messages aloud.

Parent survey.

The parent survey was sent home and anonymously returned after the last family reply was completed (Appendix D). It included three closed-ended questions and one open-ended question for parents to comment. The first two questions were designed to elicit responses based on whether parents enjoyed the process of writing a response in the family message journals. Parents were asked to respond either, always, most of the time, sometimes, or never. The third question was designed to investigate if parents felt the program was useful to their child's writing development and parents were asked to respond with a yes or no answer. Question four allowed for parents to comment on anything they liked or did not like about the program and allowed significant space for comments. Seventeen out of 21 surveys were returned to the school office.

Observations.

I kept a reflective journal documenting notes on my lesson plans and objectives, followed by students' writing behaviour, the content of the message and purpose for writing, and whether students were showing an improvement in their writing and the impact that the authentic audience may have had on their writing. The journal was

divided into sections with comments indicating what I did, what I observed and my reflections of these observations. I had four pages of type-written data, single spaced in size 10 font.

I commented on the focus of my lesson, including the topic and objective, such as opening and closing a letter, asking a question, or using a topic sentence followed by detailed sentences below. Next, I commented if I noticed that students' were able to transfer the ideas I was modeling into their own messages. Most importantly, I commented on students' writing improvement, including their use of inventive spelling, length of writing, and their sense of audience awareness by negotiating their own family stories into their messages. Not only did I comment on students' writing, I also commented on students' excitement with the reading of their messages and their parents' reply's to the class, as well as times when the management of the lesson was impacted by outside constraints (i.e., Christmas holidays). Finally, I commented on the content and focus of the parents' replies. This journal was useful as a reflective practitioner because I continuously observed where students were in their writing and where they needed to be next, and my subsequent lesson reflected this process.

Data Analysis

Writing samples.

Each writing sample was analyzed separately after completion of the data collection period using the Quick Scale Rubric from the grade one "Writing from Experience" Performance Standards (2009) (See Appendix B). This included the topic of the message

(type of content in message), meaning (ideas, information and details), style (clarity and style of description), the sentence level conventions (spelling, capitals, and punctuation) and an additional category, the length of the message (number of sentences or ideas in each sentence). The messages were coded for each aspect of writing using the performance scale from 1 to 4, where 1 was not yet meeting expectations, 2 was minimally meeting expectations, 3 was meeting expectations and 4 was exceeding expectations. I kept a chart of each student's score for each aspect of writing and included particular entries I found most intriguing (See Appendix C for an example of one focal student's data that I collected). I then compared the data of the first message (early writing sample) and the last message (late writing sample) in each of the categories for writing (meaning, length, style, conventions). These writing samples were also assessed (blind-marked) by two other grade one teachers to ensure validity and reliability of my findings. When the scores between teachers differed, the scores were discussed and then averaged. For instance, if one teacher scored a student's spelling at 3, and another teacher scored it as a 2, it was recorded as 2.5.

The second part of my analysis of the messages consisted of coding the purposes for the messages. This would help to identify the social practices students were writing for and help to determine how a genre based approach impacted the students' writing. Similar to Wollman-Bonilla (2000), I utilized Halliday's Seven Functions of Language, as a classification to determine how students were able to use these journals to serve different purposes. Although these functions were based on children's oral language, (Keenan, 1975) they were adapted for writing, since Grade 1 students' writing is often

conversational and interactive (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Here is how they were adapted:

Students' Message Purposes (based on Halliday's Functions of Writing)

- 1 to inform, convey facts (Representational/Informative)
- 2 to regulate family behaviour, get family to do something (Regulatory)
- 3 to get things done from families (Persuasive/Instrumental)
- 4 to interact with families, memories (Interactional)
- 5 to share personal ideas and feelings (Personal)
- 6 to create an imagined textual experience (Imaginative)
- 7 to figure out (Heuristic)

In addition to the students' writing samples, I classified the 52 family replies based on themes designed by Wollman-Bonilla (2000). The family replies fell into 5 main categories that I coded for analysis, which included when the parents 1) showed interest in their child's learning and message, 2) expanded on their child's knowledge and provided new information, 3) shared stories and opinions, 4) acknowledged good ideas and said they would try them, and 5) asked questions to encourage thinking. Further, the message purposes and family replies were also coded by two other grade one teachers to ensure validity and reliability of my findings.

Parent survey.

Data from the parent survey were compiled from all 17 surveys collected. The first three questions were tallied to identify the number of ways the parents collectively responded to each question. For the fourth question, I coded the parents' written comments into common themes based on my own readings of the data. These themes included:

enjoyment with experience, observations of improvement with writing and spelling, and requests to continue the activity all year. The themes I developed were based on 12 comments about the experience.

Observations.

For my observational data, I transcribed my notes for analysis and developed themes based on an iterative process of going back and forth and continuing to read the data and my literature review. These notes were made on the focal children and as I reviewed the notes, I condensed them from narrower to broader categories. The observational themes I developed led into my analysis of each writing sample and began to clarify the emerging patterns.

Findings

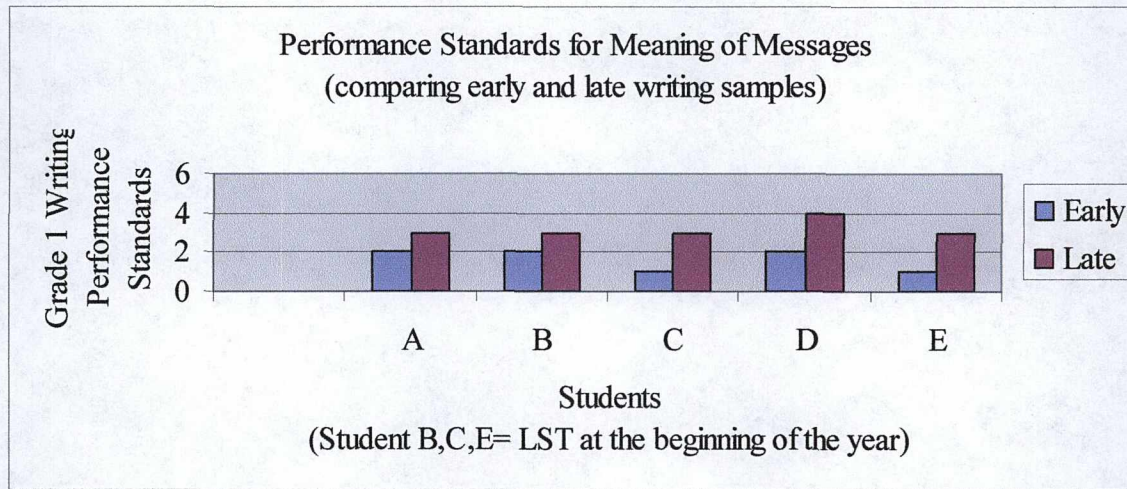
Based on the observations from my data analysis, some exciting patterns emerged to show that students writing did improve over time using family message journals within the context of a genre approach and shared writing experience. Below I will discuss the major findings from my three sources of data.

Meaning, Length and Use of Inventive Spelling

From the five students' data records (see Appendix C) and a comparison of the first and last messages for each student (early and late writing samples), students showed improvement in their writing based on the grade one Writing from Experience Performance Standards. Table 1 indicates that all of the focal students showed improvement by at least one point in the meaning of their message, based on the grade one writing performance standards. (Meaning includes student's ideas, information and details. See Appendix A for definition of meaning). It is important to note that Students

B, C, and E were classified as needing language support in reading and spelling at the beginning of grade one and received pull out support four times per week.

Table 1. Meaning of Messages (based on early and late writing samples)



Comparable results were noted in my observations. In the beginning, some students' messages were very simple and included a picture. On the day of the Making Rain science experiment, Tony (Student E) wrote "Dear mom and dad, we mad ran Love, Tony" instead of "We made rain." Beside his message was an elaborate picture showing how he did the experiment. By the end of the 11 weeks, Tony's writing had greatly improved in length and detail, and he was able to sound out more advanced words. For example:

Dear Mom I am so hape. I wish you and DAD wod owlees be hom. I love you mom and DAD. Pleease git me a IPoot tush. We lrnd abowt Chinees noo yeer I love you. Love, Tony.

Similarly, the majority of the focal students also improved in their length of their messages and in their use of invented spelling. In their length of their messages, three students improved by over three sentences, one student stayed the same, and one student improved by only one sentence. In students' use of invented spelling, all students showed improvement by at least one point (based on the grade one writing performance standards).

Audience Awareness

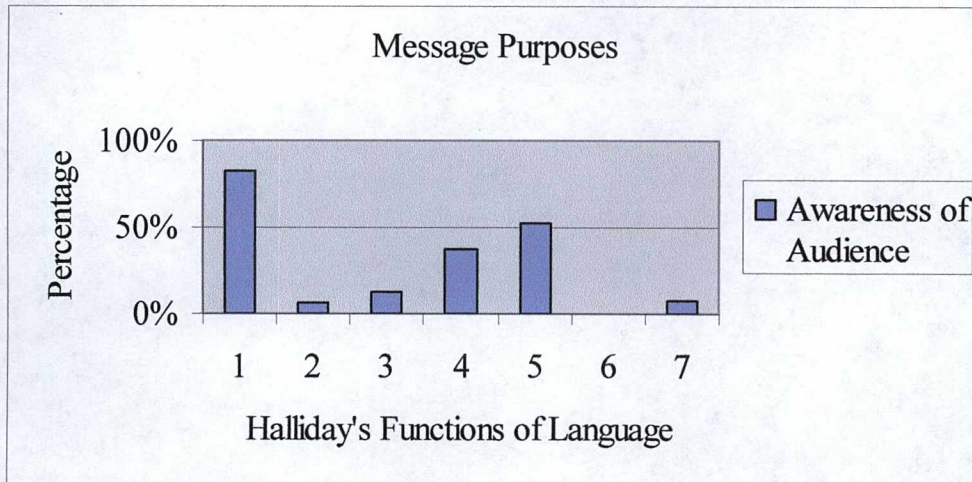
In my observational data, I first noticed how students' sense of audience awareness had improved. Students began to ask their parents questions, they showed excitement about events at home, shared memories, interacted with their parents, and added personalized touches familiar only to their parents. They were more aware of their parents as readers of their writing. For instance, Erin (Student D) wrote in February (Note: in this example his invented spelling was edited):

Dear Dad, I can't wait to go the store after school and buy badminton rackets with you. Do you want to play a badminton game? Just be careful! I might hit the birdie over the fence, Love Erin.

Other students adjusted the opening and closing of their letters. One student wrote to her cats, while another student began his letter with "Hi wuts up g-unit!", which was a nickname used for his Dad.

From the codings of the writing samples, it also became apparent that students' message purposes were indicating this improved sense of audience awareness. Table 2 shows that students most often wrote to inform their parents but were also adding other message purposes in their letters.

Table 2. Students' Message Purposes based on Halliday's Functions of Language



Message Purposes

1. To inform (Representational)
2. To regulate family behaviour (Regulatory)
3. To get things from families (Persuasive/Instrumental)
4. To interact with families (Interactional)
5. To share personal ideas and feelings (Personal)
6. To create an imagined textual experience (Imaginative)
7. To figure out (Heuristic)

Students were increasingly aware of the aspects of writing different genres, a finding which is consistent with the studies and reviews completed by Wyatt-Smith, 1997, Derewianka, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001a. For instance in Figure 3, Karen (Student B), who struggled with literacy at the beginning of year, wrote a message near the end of the study indicating her ability to negotiate between different genres within one letter, as she both recounted an event and gave instructions on how to play a new game:

Dear Whisky (her cat)

We watched a movie about magnets.

And did you know that the earth

was a magnet? Isn't that cool?

In the gym we played a new game

and it was Mingle-Mingle. And this is

how you play it. You have to run around,

call out mingle-mingle and then the

teacher holds up her fingers and

makes a number. And then we all have

to huddle up whatever number

the teacher holds up in her hands.

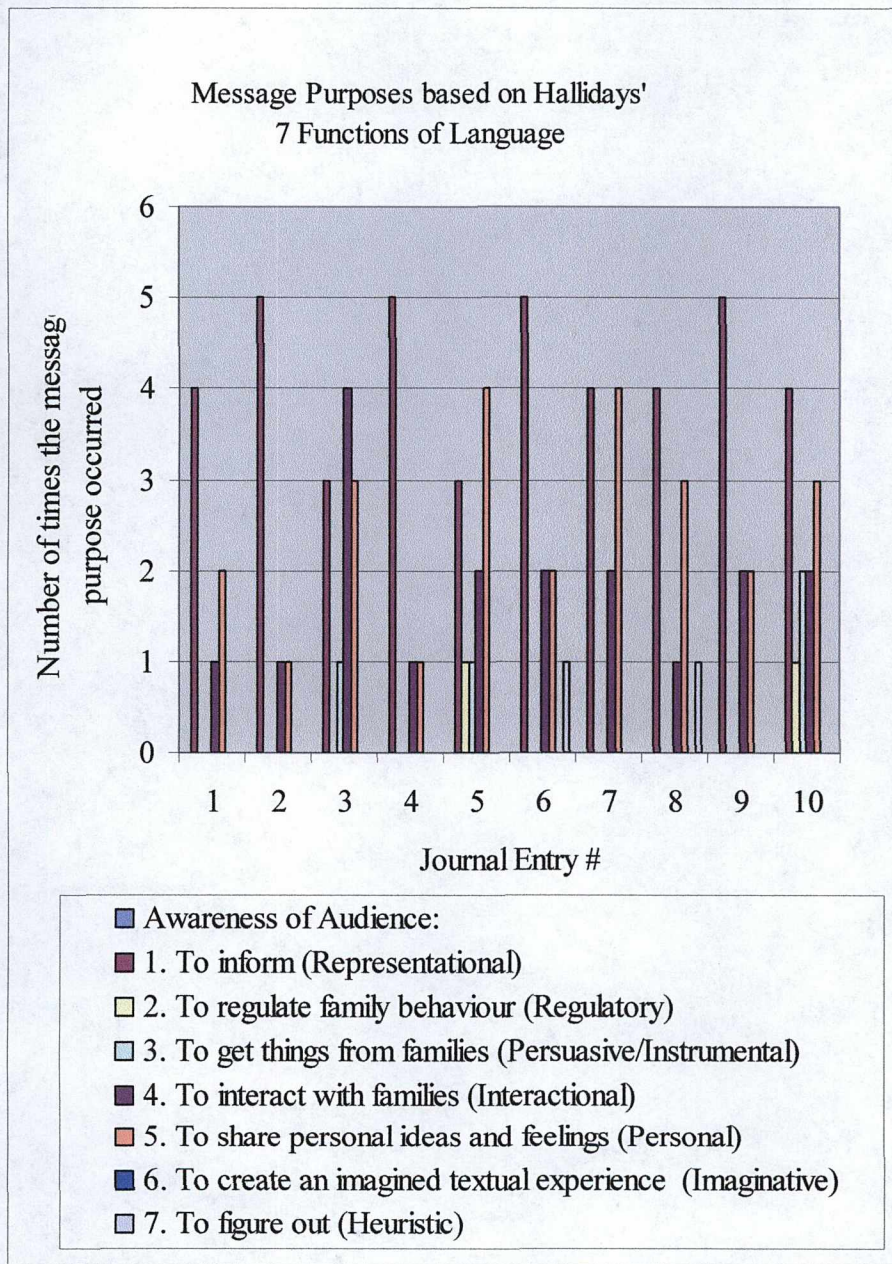
Love Karen.

Der wisKy
 wy ^{watched} wascht a moo
 vy adot magnits
 and did you no
 that the rth wus
 a magnits is it
 that cool?
 in the jim wy
 plad a Roo game
 and it wus Mingle
 Mingle and this
 is how you plait
 you haft
 run around the jim
 callot Mingle-Mingle
 anth the titch ^{teacher} ha
 ds up her fings
 and ^{makes} max numndus
 and then wy ol
 haf to ol huddl
 up wuterv
 numdm the tychn
 holds up with
 her hons
 Love

Figure 3. Karen's message that negotiated two genres into one letter (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001a).

Further evidence of this improvement in the focal students' sense of audience awareness can be seen in Table 3 where I charted the student's audience awareness (based on Halliday's Functions of Language) over time to see how students were able to use multiple purposes in their writing.

Table 3: Message Purposes over time (based on Halliday's Functions of Language)



For instance, Tony needed language support at the beginning of the year and was only able to use one message purpose in his early writing sample but he later wrote a message that illustrated his strong understanding of audience. In this text in Figure 4, he interacted with his family and apologized for an event that had taken place at home.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Today is 100th day. PS. I love you

and the school is so fun. PS. I wish

I can see you always. I am so sorry

that I dropped your iphone in the toilet.

I wish I had the money to buy a new iphone.

Love Tony.

Dear

Dear Mom and Dad

Today is 100th Day PS.

I Love you and the

SCHOOL is so fun PS.

I wish I can see you always I am

so sreu that I dropt your Iphon

in the toilet I wish I Had the

mane to biu a noow Iphon.

Love

Figure 4. Tony's apology message.

Karen, who also struggled at the beginning of the year, wrote in January to her cat about the new school name:

Dear Sasha, We had a school announcement and it was about the school name.

And the school name was Hurricanes. It wasn't the one I was hoping for but I still like it. I guess everybody voted for the Hurricanes. But I don't care because I think it's kind of a cool name. So I guess that's what the name for the school is.

Love, Karen.

This text illustrated that she informed her cat (and her family) about the school name, and also shared her personal feelings, which indicated two different message purposes.

Similarly, Erin showed two message purposes.

Dear mom and dad, We talked about the earthquake in Haiti. I felt sad for them

but Roan's grandpa is helping those people, Love Erin.

Erin interacted with her parents and shared her sadness based on the discussions in class.

As well, she tried to solve the problem by sharing that a student's Grandfather in the class

was helping. This final connection has the potential to be heuristic because in her limited understanding she has analyzed the problem and suggested a solution.

Finally, the samples did show mixed results. Students' interest levels and motivation for writing varied given the timing of the day and proximity of holidays and weekends. Some entries were very detailed and students were able to creatively negotiate other genres. At other times, however, the same students showed less effort and produced a weaker overall sample.

Family Replies

The family replies were an essential component of the program, so it was encouraging that parents in the focal study replied to every message. In the family reply data, I found that parents more often demonstrated an interest and shared stories in their replies, but less often expanded on their child's knowledge, acknowledged good ideas and said they would try them, or asked questions to encourage thinking. Two striking differences were apparent. Parents were either able to show interest, expand on ideas and ask questions, or they were not able to focus on the content behind the message and their reply focused on minor details like neatness. The two examples below will show these differences. In the first, Kurt (Student C) wrote to his parents about the experience of making toys during a field trip to a heritage museum, and his mom responded,

Dear Kurt, Would you like to live like the pioneers? I think it would be a lot different than the way we live now. Love Mom

She was able to express interest in Kurt's message but also asked a question to encourage more thinking on the topic and gave her opinion. This next example shows the lack of

interest in what the content of the child's message was about, therefore negating the meaning of the message entirely.

Dear Alex, You did a very good job printing. Mom and dad are very proud of you. Love mom and dad.

While this message indicates admiration and acknowledgement of the students' work, it does not specifically address the content of the message. This finding indicates that parents may have needed guidance in how to scaffold their replies in order to elicit further information from their child.

Parental Support

Parental involvement was an essential component of this study and I was interested to learn how parents felt about this process. From the two questions, "Did you enjoy the process of using Family Message Journals with your child?", and "Did you enjoy writing a response to your child's weekly journal message?", seventeen out of 17 parents answered "always". For the question, "Do you think it was useful to your child's writing development?", 17 out of 17 parents also answered "Yes". These results showed 100% satisfaction with the experience. In terms of the parents' written comments, all 12 comments favoured the experience. The parents showed genuine interest in their child's learning and appreciated the new line of communication that was established for them. Not only did all the parents from the focal children respond to every message with a reply, the 17 parents who responded to the survey all enjoyed the experience, which indicated they observed the benefit this journal provided, too! In addition, five parents commented that they wanted the journals to continue all year, such as this parent's comment:

This was a fantastic experience that I would enjoy all year long. It's such a nice break from the hustle of daily life to quietly take in my child's thoughts and in turn send mine back to him. Thank you very much Mrs. Lowe. I will continue this at home even when the school journal project is complete.

Five parents also commented that they noticed an improvement in their child's writing over time, and three commented on noticing an improvement in spelling. The responses were all heartfelt, indicating the enjoyment of the experience. One parent commented that her daughter's "confidence grew with all her entries and she has continued to write in her new diary at home". Another commented that it helped both the child's reading and writing, and that when "she read us her message she often corrected her writing". Most parents commented on the great degree of progress their child made between the first message and the last one.

Discussion

Upon analysis of my investigation, three main findings emerged from the instruction and implementation of the family message journal program using the context of a genre based approach and shared writing experience to teach writing. (1) Students showed improvement in their meaning and description of messages, their message length and their use of invented spelling based on the first and last messages (early and late writing samples). (2) Students showed an improved sense of audience awareness over time, as students were able to add multiple purposes in their messages and were beginning to negotiate other genres into their messages. (3) Families showed strong support for the messages, indicated in the number of family replies and survey satisfaction results.

Role of a Genre Based Approach

This study extends the findings of previous research. Family message journals complemented a genre approach to writing instruction (Wollman-Bonilla 2001; Derewianka, 2003; Wyatt-Smith, 1997) and Halliday's model for language development. Not only did these students learn how to write letters, they negotiated other genres (such as genres to instruct, describe, and entertain/socialize with their parents) within this genre. The students' overall growth in writing within this genre, indicative of the assessments of the early and late writing samples, shows evidence for the use of this journal as a method to improve emergent writing. As Chapman (1995) pointed out, and as is evident in this study, students had the freedom within this model to appropriate other genres they were learning into their writing.

Sense of Audience Awareness

Writing to their families established a strong purpose in students that was documented in this study. As researchers have pointed out (Dyson, 2003; Frank 1992; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001a;), students appeared more motivated by an authentic audience that responded immediately, and showed a developed sense of audience awareness by adding multiple purposes in their writing as the study progressed. It was evident that students had begun to ask questions, share memories between each other, add personalized touches only their parents would be familiar with, change the way they opened and closed their letters, show excitement about events at home and negotiate other genres into their messages. They were increasingly more aware of their parents as readers of their writing. It was fascinating to see this improvement in their competence and ease with which their family stories became part of the classroom.

Family involvement

Family involvement was an understated necessity in this study. The nature of the family and community involvement in this middle class neighbourhood may explain in part why the success rate for family replies was so high. Similar to findings from Jordon, Snow and Porche (2000), Wollman-Bonilla (2001b), Pahl & Kelly (2005) the parental involvement seemed to coincide with students' improvement in their writing. In addition, a personally significant finding was the genuine positive response parents showed with the experience. A new line of communication was established for parents that enhanced the bond between school, teacher and children. Further, this study provides clear support for the notion that students do not simply live in spheres of home or school. They operate somewhere in the middle, in their own constructions of reality. The parental involvement allowed for their writing to thrive.

Limitations

This was a small study with a focus on the writing samples of 5 students in one classroom. Therefore, the results can be informative to primary teacher's writing instructional practices, but cannot be generalized to other classrooms. There are several limitations that need to be discussed given the context of grade one writers. First, no singular specific approach can be attributed directly to an increased improvement in students' writing. Also, it was difficult for some students to be metacognitive and reflect on their new learning in class and then attempt to write this with their limited skill set. It was easier for them to write on events that had taken place, but it required more thought for them to be specific about things they had learned. Lastly, students were not present during the data analysis to review what they had written and I did not make notes on all

writing samples unless I felt the parent needed help to understand the meaning of message. It would have been helpful if students were present during my analysis as I occasionally had to interpret the invented spelling. Moreover, I did not partake in the conversations that took place between the children and parents, nor did I see the scaffolding or other connections that may have taken place during the sharing of the messages at home.

In addition to the above limitations, it is important to note that the families were very responsive to their children's messages. Their messages showed interest and encouragement, and the parents appeared to value the process that they were involved in. However, not every family would have the necessary resources, time and knowledge that this community of parents appeared to have, in order to provide such caring responses.

Further Research

There were three queries left to ponder upon completion of the study which further research might help to address. The first involved analyzing more closely the shared writing experience and the specific impact this had on students' overall writing performance. My data were unable to address this. More significantly, was the importance of guiding the parents with their replies. While parents were often able to demonstrate interest in their child's learning and share stories and opinions, I found that they did not expand on their child's knowledge, try their child's suggestions or ask questions to encourage thinking. This indicated that parents could have been provided with guidance in how to scaffold their replies to elicit further information from their child. However, I did observe that the parents' replies often suited the reading levels of the children, short at first, with increasing length and details throughout the year. Finally,

I did not find evidence within the writing samples to show that students continued conversations from one message and reply into the next message. This could be due to the timing of when the students wrote in their journals, or the nature of grade one students' short attention spans. It would have been interesting to allow for the daily use of the journals to allow for more back and forth conversations to develop.

Final Reflections

Throughout this process it became evident that emergent writers benefit from, and are motivated by, writing assignments that involve family members and authentic audiences. These journals became reflections of real conversations and observations that had taken place and children were able to share genuine language and communication that families share outside of school, indicative of Halliday's model (Keenan, 1975) and Wollman-Bonilla's (2001a) findings. As Dyson (2003) and Frank (1992) describe, writing for an authentic audience did transform these students' writing intentions. My students were able to expand on their knowledge of both language and society's purposes for writing letters (Derewianka, 2003), and negotiate other genres into this form. The families' involvement was an immense component in this study and their immediate feedback in the replies allowed for many positive results they observed and their children were shown to make. It was an honour to observe and allow this process to unfold. It is my hope that other primary teachers consider more closely the role that families play in their classroom and look at ways these conversations and outside spheres can co-exist at school.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Grade 1 Writing from Experience Performance Standards

Quick Scale: Grade 1 Writing From Experience

The Quick Scale is a summary of the Rating Scale that follows. Both describe student achievement in March-April of the school year.

Aspect	Not Yet Within Expectations	Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)	Fully Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
SNAPSHOT	<i>The writing may consist of a string of letters or be dictated for someone else to write down. The student needs a great deal of help.</i>	<i>The writing is recognizable as conventional writing and conveys some ideas or information. The student often needs some help.</i>	<i>The writing is readable and makes sense. The student is able to write independently with occasional help.</i>	<i>The writing communicates ideas or information with some description and detail. The student is able to write independently.</i>
MEANING • ideas and information • details	• may be able to "read" own writing, but meaning often changes each time	• sentences or ideas may not be related • little development, few details	• sentences or ideas are related • some detail	• some individuality • develops a topic with supporting details
STYLE • clarity and variety of language • description	• simple words • when "reading" or dictating, may be one long sentence or a series of short, stilted sentences	• conversational • repeats simple patterns, favourite words	• conversational, some simple description • repeats simple patterns	• some descriptive language • takes risks to use new words or patterns
FORM • follows models or examples • sequence	• usually a drawing with a string of letters or one or two dictated sentences	• may be very brief • drawing may provide much of the information	• follows form modelled by teacher • writing can stand alone	• logically connected and sequenced • writing can stand alone
CONVENTIONS • capitals and small letters • spelling • use of phonics • punctuation • spacing • legibility	• strings of capital letters • may show correct initial consonant • not yet able to use phonics • no punctuation • may be copied or dictated to another person	• mostly capital letters • some words spelled conventionally • many words spelled phonetically • may experiment with punctuation • parts are legible	• both capitals and small letters • many familiar words spelled conventionally • new or unfamiliar words spelled phonetically • some punctuation • legible	• both capitals and small letters • most familiar words spelled conventionally • phonics and word patterns used to solve spelling problems • generally written in sentences; uses punctuation • legible

Appendix B: Codings for Writing Samples and Family Replies

Writing Samples: Message Purposes (based on Halliday's Functions of Language)

- 1 to inform, convey facts (Representational/Informative)
- 2 to regulate family behaviour, get family to do something (Regulatory)
- 3 to get things done from families (Persuasive/Instrumental)
- 4 to interact with families, memories (Interactional)
- 5 to share personal ideas and feelings (Personal)
- 6 to create an imagined textual experience (Imaginative)
- 7 to figure out (Heuristic)

Family's replies:

- 1 shows interest in child's learning and message
- 2 expand on child's knowledge and provide new information
- 3 share stories/opinions
- 4 acknowledge good ideas and say they will try them
- 5 ask questions to encourage thinking

Appendix C: Example of Writing Data Collected

An example of Student A's writing data I collected based on 10 writing samples from Nov. 20 to February 12.

Note: Pre-test and Post-test data for each student was taken from Nov. 20 and Feb. 12 messages.

Student A Emergent/girl	Nov. 20	Nov. 27	Dec. 4	Dec. 11	Jan. 8	Jan. 15	Jan. 22	Jan. 29	Feb. 4	Feb. 12
Topic	Family/owls	Letters/numbers	Visiting brother soon	Playdough	Penguins/Winter	Painting/Penguins	Spring, clay animals	School name	Magnets	Olympics
Meaning	2 (diff't topics)	2 (same)	3	2	3	3	3.5	3	¾	3
Length	2	2	3.5	2.5	3	5	6	7	4	5
Style	2	2	3	2	3	3	3	3.5	4	3.5
Spelling	2	2	3	2.5	3	3	3.5	3	3	3
Capitals/lower case	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3.5	3
Punctuation	1	1	1	1	2	2	2/3	3	3	2
Halliday's fxns of language	H1	H1, H5	H4, H5	H1	H1	H1, H5	H1, H5	H1, H5	H1, H4, H5	H1, H5
Student's message	1	1,4	4	1	1, 5	1, 4	1, 3, 5	1, 3, 4,	1, 3	2,3
Family's reply	1,2	1,3	1,2,3	1,4	1,2,3	1,3	1,3	2, 3,	1, 2,	1,2,3

Nov. 20 "Dear mom a Dad We are learning about Owls Spit at Pellets Sum families on have ouw parit LOVE name"

Translation: Dear Mom and Dad. We are learning Owls. Owls spit out pellets. Some families only have one parent."

Feb. 12

"Dear mom and DaD I am excited becose it is Going to be the Ollpics I like the Olipics. Now I am Not Going I mit Go Nex yer but Thay will be Neyre Cuming Evre ageN I wish Thay wood come agen Love name"

Translation

Dear Mom and Dad. I am excited because it is going to be the Olympics. I like the Olympics. Now I am not going. I might go next year but they will be never coming ever again. I wish they would come again.

-improvement in length, meaning, and style (adding more detail, sentences related and develops topic). Almost persuasive, but H1- to inform, and H5 to share personal feelings and ideas

Appendix D: Parent Survey

**Parent Survey on Experiences with
Family Message Journals**

1. Did you enjoy the process of using Family Message Journals with your child?

- ☐ 1. Always
- ☐ 2. Most of the time
- ☐ 3. Sometimes
- ☐ 4. Never

2. Did you enjoy writing a response to your child's weekly journal message?

- ☐ 1. Always
- ☐ 2. Most of the time
- ☐ 3. Sometimes
- ☐ 4. Never

3. Do you think it was useful to your child's writing development to have them write a message home to you?

- ☐ 1. Yes
- ☐ 2. No

4. Please comment on anything that you liked, did not like or would change, about using family message journals in Grade 1?

<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
