

**BUILDING HOME AND SCHOOL  
COMMUNICATION THROUGH JOURNALLING  
A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS**

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## Abstract

The Home and School Journal has been a vehicle to build more regular communication between the student, teacher and the parents. This project explains the journey toward the implementation of the project with a literature review, the history of the project, a detailed look at the practical procedures used and new additions which have emerged from journalling. This five-year project has been successful in building better communication between the child, the teacher and the home, increasing the child's ownership of his/her learning, increasing parental awareness of what has been significant for their child on a weekly basis at school and is a permanent document which shows the progress and experiences of that year.

## Acknowledgements

### Dedication

To my husband, Al, and my two children, Erin and Bryan, for all their support and love. Without their encouragement and patience, completion of this project would not have been possible.

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## Part I Introduction

### The Purpose of the Project

This project represents the fusion of several studies that I have conducted over the last four years in the area of better home and school communication.

The main vehicle for this type of communication has been a weekly Home and School Journal, which originated in 1993. Over the years, with the input of several colleagues and parents, the journal has evolved, but remains true to its most important purpose...a regular three-way conversation between the child, the teacher, and the parent.

I hope the description of this project will serve as a guide to any teacher who wishes to build a bridge for such communication.

The description of my project will include my journey, a literature review, history of the project, description of the project, general perceptions of students, parents, and teachers over time, and new components which have evolved through journalling.

### Significance of the Project

This document may serve as an inspiration and practical starting point for other educators who wish to further build home and school communication through journalling.

It has certainly withstood the test of time for myself and provided countless opportunities for beginning conversations about what is happening in the academic and personal lives of my students.

It has built a bridge which has been travelled reciprocally between home and school.

## Part II Components of the Project

### Building Connections - The Journey - The Literature Review

#### Guiding children on the road to literacy

By Susan R. Marshall (1997)

As my students and I begin our journey on the road to literacy,

I must remember...

not to walk behind them or I may be tempted to push them along in their travels,

not to walk in front of them or I may pull them along like a tour guide,

but to walk beside them so that our encounters may be shared,

each of us opening the eyes of the other with our unique observations

And when they face obstacles in their journey as many of them inevitably will, we

will confront them together.

As we travel, a sense of community will develop and we will know that the

journey has been richer because it has been shared.

As I read this selection by Susan Marshall (1997), it exemplified in many ways the beliefs that I have about the importance of involving children in their journey toward literacy.

In her book, Living Between the Lines, Lucy M. Calkins (1991), stated that "literacy is inseparable from living." After being involved in writer's and reader's workshops for more than fifteen years, I have learned that the more children are involved in reading, writing, and sharing their experiences with text and relating them to their lives, the greater their enthusiasm for doing so.

Early in my career, I spent the majority of my time as the tour guide, having

students reading passages, answering my questions, filling in blanks, memorizing spelling lists, and correcting errors that I had found in editing their work, without even a word passing between us in the whole process. I was frustrated when students did not use all the skills I had taught them over and over and over again. Even more frustrating, was their general lack of enthusiasm and commitment to literacy learning. I tried to push them along their travels, but found out that unless they were ready to incorporate the skills and ideas I was teaching, little of what was taught appeared when they wrote stories or read to me.

The children had little commitment to changing because the goals and objectives for them were being set by the curriculum and the teacher with no involvement by them. There were few connections being made by the children between literacy and their lives. What was the purpose of learning all of this 'stuff'? What did it have to do with what was important to them in their lives?

Building those connections between living and literature, building a purpose to become literate, is crucial.

Literacy is like boats and telescopes, useful but not restricted to utilitarian ends. To teach reading and writing as if their most important uses were completing tax returns and job applications is like using a telescope as a doorstep...the real tragedy is that competent readers and writers as well as the less able leave school with a lifelong aversion to reading and writing, which they regard as purely school activities, as trivial and tedious 'work'. (Smith as quoted in Cramer, 1994)



Personally, I can relate to this concept with regard to writing, as a grade school student, I always considered writing to be something that was imposed upon me, not something I could relate to using my past experiences. I was given one hour a week to create this perfect story about something I had never experienced. How could I, as a teacher, build those connections between living and literacy for my students?

When I began offering instruction according to a writer's workshop model, I gave children topics to write about, but as time went on, I found they were most enthusiastic about sharing their experiences or relating story events in reader's workshop to experiences they themselves had encountered. The more opportunity they had to share and relate their ideas to their lives, the more enthusiastic they became.

Cairney and Langbien (1989), in their article about building communities of readers and writers state..."Our concern for the social nature of literacy should lead to a recognition that reading and writing events involve social relationships."

Cairney and Langbien (1989) further suggest that reading and writing... involves social relationships among people: among teachers and students, among students, among parents and children, and among authors and readers. The social relationships involved in reading and writing include establishing social groups and ways of interacting with others; gaining or maintaining status and social position; and acquiring culturally appropriate ways of thinking, problem solving, valuing and feeling. Meaning is constructed in a social context and, in turn, language learning is dependent upon social relationships.

As I began to walk beside my students and we shared our encounters, we began to make connections from literature to our lives.

The concept of journaling seemed to be a natural step. It provided a link for each student to share their insights and for me to respond. As Graves (1990) relates..."Good teachers do have voices and opinions, but the strength of each is enhanced two-fold when children know that the teacher is interested in what they have to say. Strong voices listening to emerging voices show the highest form of respect."

This brings to mind a grade six literature study class I was involved in several years ago. The book, Walk Two Moons, by Sharon Creech, was written from the point of view of the main character, Salamanca Tree Hiddle or Sal, and is actually three stories in one. Each story is about Sal, one in the present which describes her trip across the United States with her grandparents, while in search of her mother, one of her new life and friends since her mother's disappearance, and one about her life before her mother left Sal and her father to travel to Idaho. The novel moves very effectively from one story to another through Sal's recollection of events. By retelling the story of her new friend, Phoebe, to her grandparents, Sal comes to the realization that she is really making sense of her own.

I reluctantly began to read the book, Walk Two Moons, by Sharon Creech, to my class. I was reluctant because, personally, I could not put this book down and was touched so many times by the events of this story that I did not want to face its rejection by a group of twelve year olds. I decided that it was certainly worth the risk and, even if my class was not equally touched by the story's events, we could at least look at some of the literary techniques used by the author. We had done several class novels that year and

they had been required to do a great deal of writing. I decided that the only assignment for this book would be discussion and journaling.

The students found many ways in which they could link their lives with the trials and joys of Sal's. It is their final responses that I will share. All that I asked was that my students not talk at the end of the book, but instead, go back and write down their feelings about it. I realized they really did learn from and love this book, as several wrote for a full half hour and then stayed after school to finish. Through this one activity alone, I learned that there are times when real learning, and thought, and love of literature come from sharing and discussing and crying together. Even though it cannot be measured in an accountable evaluative way, it is truly what teaching is all about for me.

Here are just a few quotes from students' responses. Amazingly enough, not one student found the book boring or without some merit. One student wrote:

I thought Walk Two Moons was a really good book. It is now probably my favorite book. It was really funny. There are lots of messages that we all could relate about. I thought it was quite a touching book. I like books like that because it means the author really was writing from her heart. I think those books are the best to read. I wish Salamanca had found her mother alive and her Grandma hadn't died. It was sad. I think it would be hard to go on living knowing your mother wasn't coming back and you would never see her again. I think the messages made an effect on the story. I think we do judge people before we really know what they're like. And I do think we think that our agenda is most important, and that we never know the worth of water until the well is dry. I think that a lot of us do let the birds of sadness nest in our hair. I think that, if my

mother died, I would have probably wished I would have died with her. Lots of people might think it doesn't matter, they wouldn't be with them forever anyway, but to some people it matters more than anything. I loved this book. It was the best book I've ever read. And I will always remember it and its messages forever. Another student expressed her ideas this way:

I really enjoyed this book for many reasons. It is a story that I could sit down with for hours. The story I felt in some ways may relate to me even though most people would not think that. Salamanca is not always what she seems. Some people think of her as a girl who is not afraid of spiders or snakes or anything like that but, when I think of Salamanca, I think of a free spirit dancing in the fields and climbing trees and sometimes sitting thinking, remembering, and praying for many things, but especially her mother.

Sometimes I have to take some time for myself and sometimes I just wish I could throw myself into my real father's arms, that he would scoop me up in his arms and never let me go, he would stay with me for hours and we would talk and play and he would never leave. But sometimes I'm glad I have (my new dad) Bill, and Karen and Brian. My life would be different if I never knew them. This book is very mysterious and the quotes make you think and wonder, and they really are true and sometimes I think some people need to take some time for themselves but they just might be afraid to.

Journalling provides an opportunity for students to create true connections between the text and their lives. It is the writing about those connections which helps children and adults to sort out what is meaningful to them. When a child or adult realizes

the potential for literature to help them make those connections, they become truly literate and no longer just see it as stuff they have to do.

In order to create a link between the home and the school, to provide an opportunity for children to share their stories, and to develop that sense of community beyond the walls of the school, parents need to play an active role.

As David Booth points out (Calkins, 1991),

How can we expect children to write when we don't know their stories? Our children story about us all the time. They story about our new shirt (Was it for your birthday?) and about our sunbathers (Where did she go over vacation?). But some teachers don't 'story' with their kids. Shouldn't shared stories be at the heart of writing workshops?...We don't need to be super teachers to teach children to write, but we do need to love and respect our children and to help them love and respect each other and themselves....Parents, too, can be invaluable partners in the effort to establish classrooms that brim over with our children's voices and lives.

Home and school journaling helps the teacher to know and understand more about the events of their lives, how their weekends went, and what they are concerned about at the moment. Calkins (1991) likens home and school journaling to a continual interview that lets her know what is exciting, tiring, sad, what the child is anticipating, apprehensive about, or proud of.

Parents who still view schools as they were when they attended, have a small taste of what is now happening through the journaling process.

School has changed dramatically since many parents were there, and, if the goal of parents involvement is to strengthen the link between home and school, parents

need to be introduced to the revitalized classroom. The many classroom learning strategies experienced by children everyday - keeping journals, interviewing, book sharing, cooperative learning, response groups, publishing - are unfamiliar to those same children's parents. We can't really expect parents to nurture and support such learning strategies if they don't understand what those strategies are or how they can be supported.(Vopat, 1994).

The journal provides an opportunity for the child, the parent, and the teacher to learn more about what is important, what is happening each week at school and at home, and to begin to ask questions and to celebrate progress made.

When parents see the growth of their child's writing in the journalling process, it verifies that content comes first and that, through modelling, the correct mechanics will emerge over time. When children are allowed to express their ideas freely for a real purpose, [Calkins (1991), Graves (1990), Harste (1988)], they begin to stretch their written vocabulary beyond the words they can spell. As they become conscious of a real audience, their confidence grows and a sense of 'self' begins to emerge in their writing.

In a grade five project implemented in Halifax, entitled Conversations As Contexts For Poems, Stories and Questions, Pat Thomas MacKinnon (1992) indicated that every three to four weeks journals of literature and ideas discussed at school went home and parents replied within two to three days.

The Home Journals broadened our community as we wrote to each other, sharing experiences, sharing what happened later in conversations at home, expressing concerns, clarifying or questioning what was written. The three-way conversation in the home journals created a common discourse of sorts that made

support for talking, learning, and inquiring in school much more compelling for us all.

The journals led to new types of conversations at home as well as at school. Home conversations began to touch on broader issues of schooling, spelling lists, and assignments. Our classroom conversations moved on, and together they provided a context for poems, stories, for questions - for other conversations. They connected us for a time and we could learn together.

It is always reassuring, when embarking on a new venture, to find journal articles describing similar projects which reinforce your ideas. I have yet to come across an article which proposes the type of Home and School Journal we have implemented, (although one may exist), but, in addition to Pat MacKinnon's project, I have come across two others.

In April of 1993, I came across an article in *Educational Leadership*, by Madeline Brick entitled When Students Write Home. Brick states that the purpose of the project was to "...help bridge the gap between home and school. I decided to try a new approach with my 7th grade heterogeneously grouped English classes. Instead of the regular mid-term progress reports - a cursory checklist of test grades, behavior, and homework completions - I wanted to encourage my students to assume more responsibility for their learning." She felt her students were gaining little from the traditional method and it was adding nothing to the learning process. Students were not taking ownership for their own learning.

Instead, she asked her students to write letters to their parents in which they reflected upon their work. After looking at their assignments and evaluations, progress

reports, marks, books read, and their writing, students reflected upon their work. Their letters told of their accomplishments, failures and goals. Once the students and teacher had edited the letters, they were sent to parents with a cover letter explaining the project. The response was overwhelming and over 94% of the parents wrote back, "...Mothers and fathers wrote lovely, caring, proud, moving, and sometimes apologetic letters. Some wrote of their childhoods. Others wrote of their dreams." (Brick, 1993).

Brick explains the success of the project was in involving students actively in their own learning by assuming responsibility for their work and by actively involving parents in the process of helping their children to succeed.

Another project I would like to highlight was the inspiration for me to initiate the Parent-Teacher Journal within our Home and School Journal. In the November, 1997 issue of The Reading Teacher, I was excited about an article by Ellen M. Finnegan entitled: Even though we have never met, I feel I know you: Using a parent journal to enhance home-school communication.

Finnegan, a third grade teacher, wanted to increase the home-school communication connection and create an open forum for dialogue. She housed the journal in a three-ring binder and enclosed this cover letter, which explains the rationale for the project:

"Dear Parents:

I would like to being a dialogue journal with you in much the same way I dialogue with your child, through writing. We could "talk" from time to time about anything you would like to write about. Every 30 days or so, you will have the opportunity to write and express anything you would like to share with me -



questions about our program, concerns, ideas, poems, significant experiences, pictures, etc., and then I will respond. After writing back to you, the journal would be circulated to another home. The writing would be open reading for other parents as the journal is circulated; unless you wish to write me a personal or specific entry, and then our dialogue would be circulated only between us. Once you respond, I'll reply back to you, keep the original in the book and pass the journal on."

Finnegan then photocopied her reply and sent the original reply back to the parent immediately. She found this journal to be very effective for parent concerns and questions, and also was a source of very positive feedback for her in her teaching. The time commitment was a major factor because she was writing a letter each night, so the binder could be passed on to a new home each day, but the positive nature of these new home connections far outweighed the time involved.

Home and school journaling begins to build the connections between the child, the parent, and the teacher. It develops the sense of community and we all "know the journey has been richer because it has been shared." (Marshall, 1997).

Through this research, and the support it provided for this type of initiative, the Home and School Journal has developed into a three-way communication between children, parents, and myself.

## History of the Project

In 1993, a group of teachers interested in aspects of children's writing decided that, even though we were doing a great deal to improve reading and writing within our classrooms, we were still neglecting a crucial element; parents as partners in their child's education.

According to Fullan (1996), "...research and best practice are abundantly clear; nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working in partnership."

Further to this, Epstein (1995), states that what does make a difference "...is multiple forms of particular involvement deliberately fostered, developed, and supported." He found at least six types of involvement working together to make a difference:

1. parenting skills (improve home environments)
2. communication (two ways - school to home, home to school)
3. volunteering or parent aides (recruit, organize parent help)
4. learning at home (specific home tutoring assistance)
5. decision-making (involve parents and develop parent leaders)
6. coordinating with community agencies.

It is the communication aspect of the journal which has served as the catalyst for our project and many others to unfold. For example, parent input through the inception of our Literacy Links Newspaper, (discussed in the 'New Additions - New Possibilities section), provided our counsellor with the opportunity to initiate a parenting workshop, and also informed parents of school and community programs.

Dolan (1994) makes it clear that parents are a crucial and largely untapped resource..."parents have a knowledge of their child that is not available to anyone else, they have a vested interest in their child's success,...and to educate children without a deep partnership of teacher-parent is hopeless..."

Cairney and Munsie (1995) see that "parents must be viewed as partners. This implies a reciprocal relationship, with each partner coming to a better understanding of the other. We need to go beyond simple involvement and recognize the vital role that parents play in education. Every attempt to involve parents more fully in their children's education has the potential to lead to this type of desirable partnership."

These authors go on to encourage educators to expand their "...very narrow definition of parent participation, which primarily seeks to determine what parents can do for teachers, rather than what schools can do for families...But if parents are to be viewed as participants in their child's learning, then teachers need to implement initiatives that bring schools and communities closer together."

The Home and School Journal has proved to be a small, but significant step toward such collaboration and developing a positive relationship between the home and school.

The traditional report card and two parent-teacher conferences per year were not building the connections we wished to see and so we worked together to set a purpose for our project. We decided upon four goals:

- i) to establish communication between home and school on a more frequent and continuing basis.
- ii) to invite parents to follow-up at home what has been introduced at school

by talking, choosing and reading books which pertain to that topic.

- iii) to increase the child's ownership of his/her learning.
- iv) for the child to plan, carry out, assess, and celebrate their own learning.

It was our intention that this weekly written communication would begin to build a trust and understanding for the daily happenings within our classrooms. In addition, we hoped that reading the journal letters and talking about the weekly events would take the child and parent beyond the usual: 'What did you do at school today? Ah, nothing,' scenario.

And finally, we hoped that the children would feel pride in explaining about what they had learned and accomplished and gain support from parents and teacher in those things that they were struggling with, both academically and socially.

In this way, we anticipated that this journal would bring us one step closer to building a solid bridge between home and school.

Since its inception, I have implemented the journal in grades two, four, five, and six. At each level, the Home and School Journal has been a very positive vehicle for building a home/school relationship.

### Description of the Project

This section will describe the practical aspects of the project with many suggestions that have improved the journal along the way.

We established our goals for our project:

- i) to establish communication between home and school on a more frequent and continuing basis.
- ii) to invite parents to follow-up at home what has been introduced at school by talking, choosing and reading books which pertain to that topic.
- iii) to increase the child's ownership of his/her learning.
- iv) for the child to plan, carry out, assess, and celebrate their own learning.

Then, we developed the following format for our journaling: At the beginning of the week, the child wrote a letter to the teacher. This was done preferably on Monday or Tuesday, so the teacher had time to write to each child before Friday. This letter could be about an area of interest, a personal experience, or some topic the child wants to know about. I was very careful to respond to student questions as closely as I could and to ask similar questions to them.

At this stage, I encouraged the children to control the nature of our conversations. It provided us with time to get acquainted. We often found out things we had in common, and what our mutual interests were.

I encouraged students to edit their work, before I received their letters, and avoided correcting the content of their letters, once they were considered delivered to me. We do not correct friendly letters sent to us and that was not the intent of the project. This proved to be an unpredicted bonus, because we could see the growth of the child's

own writing ability over the course of the year.

Each Friday morning, the journals were returned to the students. They read their letters from the teacher and we met as a group. The purpose of the meeting was to brainstorm together what we had accomplished for the week in a variety of subjects. Students were encouraged to write about the stories they had read or written, math concepts, and to tell about other significant events of the week. I often stipulate how many of these ideas should be mentioned, still leaving room for personal questions or comments which they had for their parents. Many of the ideas pertain only to their own personal accomplishments in the areas of reading, writing, math, and so on. I often checked letters for correct format, but steered away from editing, unless the children asked me during the process of their writing. Legibility and self-editing were always a focus with any of their work.

The journals then went home for the weekend and parents had the opportunity to respond.

As educators, we were concerned that this home-school link be a positive one and stressed that the purpose of the letters was to initiate positive conversation about their child's accomplishments for the week. At the beginning of the journal, we always enclosed a letter to the parents explaining the intent and the goals of the project.

Over the past few years, the journal was started in September, but only at the school level, because we felt it was very important to make contact with the parents to explain the nature of the project before the journal actually went home. We also talked about the fact that, at this time of year, parents should focus on the content of the letter, rather than the correctness of spelling, grammar, and neatness, in order to make this a

positive experience for all.

All journals were housed in a duotang binder so new journal pages, calendars of upcoming events, and newsletters could go home in one package. This format also worked very well if journals did not return on Monday, because students could still write to the teacher on a new page and did not feel left out. Sample pages for the letter to parents, a sample page of what a journal would look like at a primary level and the various seasonal journal pages, are found in Appendix A.

At the beginning of each month, the class worked together to complete a calendar of upcoming events and a class newsletter, which highlights our academic focus, important dates to remember, thank-you's to involved adults and students, books that fit with upcoming themes and reminders for students about items they need for school (Appendix B). We always made sure student birthdays were included on our calendar, so they all had the opportunity to wish classmates a happy birthday. This helped to build community.

Since the journal's inception in 1993, we have refined a few things. One factor which can break down the positive context of the project is irregular home contact. Therefore, we have added a 'celebration' page (Appendix C), which is a reward system. When students return their journals on time, they were given a sticker to put on this page. By the end of the year, they had quite a collection, and students enjoyed comparing the different stickers they received. There was also an expectation that students let their parents know by phone or note, if their journals were not at school. This built a sense of responsibility into the project with the onus on the student to remember. Once the journaling pattern was established, they were not often forgotten. It is interesting that

even at grade six, the 'celebration' sticker page was still fun for them.

Even though it was important to instill a sense of responsibility about returning their journals on time, we were also sensitive to the fact that many children, whose parents were no longer together, live in two homes. Sometimes journals could be forgotten at the home in which the child is not currently staying. A little leeway or a quick phone call by the teacher to the parent helped alleviate stress for the child.

### My Perceptions

The journal has succeeded in providing a weekly personal communication between the child, the teacher, and the parent. I would like to highlight my thoughts and perceptions of the project and how it has proven to be invaluable in building continuity into the understanding of school and home happenings for the child, the parents, and the teacher.

As a teacher, I greatly enjoyed the project, and even though it was time consuming, I will continue to use the journal, mostly because it gives me the opportunity to share ideas, both personal and academic, with my students that I would never have the opportunity to share regularly otherwise. It provides one-on-one time each week with each child, without interruption. I have learned a great deal about my students because of the types of questions they ask and even from the few who didn't find it very easy to ask. Often the most prolific writers were those who did not find it particularly easy to ask similar questions in our conversations.

It also helped me to keep in mind specific events, challenges, and successes that each child had been involved in during that week. When I could not think of specific



ideas about a child, I knew I had better pay closer attention the next week. As teachers, we always remember the children who challenge us or who need to be challenged, but it is often the ones in the middle who are sometimes overlooked, because they are achieving and consistently doing their part. The weekly journal reminds me to celebrate and recognize their successes, too.

I also learned more about the relationships of parents with their children. There were those who had the time and/or inclination to write faithfully, to praise their children for their small successes, and to question them about school happenings and projects. Some found it more difficult, due to work schedules and the general daily stresses, to respond as consistently, but every child received regular feedback from their parents and I consider that feature alone to make this project worthwhile. Sometimes when parents could not correspond, older siblings, grandparents, relatives, and caregivers wrote instead. In a few instances, these people became the main writers, but every child was given regular recognition by someone at home and at school for their achievements.

In the beginning, it was crucial not to 'feed' information to the parents through responses to the children's letters. I strictly answered their questions (as already mentioned), and tried to pose similar questions to them. As the year passed, I tried to give students a boost about something positive that had happened during the week or talk about a concept they had struggled with, hoping to open those lines of communication between parent and child.

Whether those particular ideas were discussed, I often did not know, but the opportunity was certainly there, opportunities which would never have arisen so regularly without the journal.

As mentioned, each Friday, to facilitate ideas for student letters to parents, the class reviewed concepts covered, activities they had participated in, and then, specific accomplishments they had made in writer's and reader's workshop. They shared goals in writer's workshop which had been discussed during individual conferencing and group sharing sessions or that they saw were important to them.

When doing Friday sessions, I tried to write ideas very briefly and not in sentence form. At younger levels, a student sometimes had a tendency to copy word for word the group's ideas, instead of writing about themselves specifically. This still was a catalyst for more personal discussions at home, but I did not want a 'generic' listing of events without personal insights added.

Similarly, even though the original intent of the project was to talk about school learning, I did not discourage children from sharing other events that were a part of their lives. Because journals were written to me at the beginning of the week, much of what was written focused on exciting weekend events. It has given me a better insight into the things that interest my students outside of the classroom and many times has helped me to suggest topics for writing when students are sometimes unable to think of something to write about.

The journal has both positive and negative aspects for each party concerned and I would like to review those from the teacher's perspective, the parents' and the child's.

## The Child's Perspective

### Positive Aspects

- celebrated the week's successes
- wrote for a purpose
- learned from practice, how to write a friendly letter
- received feedback on a personal level from a parent and a teacher each week
- praised on paper for work well done, and then can reread positives that have been given
- learned to celebrate personal successes
- learned to be responsible about writing to each adult and bringing the journal back on time
- learned about their parents' school experiences
- possessed a permanent journalled account of the school year which can be kept and reread.

### Challenges

- sometimes had difficulty thinking about what to write
- must be organized and return the journal to and from school

## The Parent's Perspective

### Positive Aspects

- knew what their child was excited about academically
- shared stories of their schooling experiences
- learned about what was challenging for their child both socially and academically on a frequent basis
- asked more specific questions about school because they were more regularly informed
- saw their child's growth in writing during the year
- learned more about books children liked and read
- started conversations about upcoming events and how they could be actively involved
- had the opportunity to discuss personal tragedies that others have had, like the death of a grandparent or what to do when things weren't going so well on the playground.

### Challenges

- time was often a factor and a difficult one to overcome.
- In some cases, other significant people wrote regularly if the parent couldn't.

## The Teacher's Perspective

### Positive Aspects

- couldn't talk with a student on a personal level each week
- learned more about how students felt about work and themselves
- surprised at the insight and honesty of children who teach us about ourselves
- had more frequent and positive conversations with parents
- praised children each week for their small successes
- encouraged children to persevere when tasks or school relationships were difficult
- learned what was important and significant to the child, what they liked and disliked
- helped to decide upon appropriate novels and themes when those choices fit events in children's lives
- created a better picture of the whole child, not just the one seen in the classroom.

### Challenges

- the biggest challenge is the time commitment. A class of thirty means at least two hours per week of writing beyond our regular work (But it is well worth it!).
- must always be ready to write two or three things each child has done well each week (kept me on my toes with a large class)

Journals helped parents, children, and teachers tell their stories to each other which brings to mind a poem by Julia Candace Corliss from The Reading Teacher. April, 1997.

### Stories

Stories paint pictures

With language.

Stories taste of experience

And memory.

And imagination.

Stories touch our minds

And our hearts.

Stories draw us together

And link the past

With the present

And the future.

Truly the taste of stories

Lingers on and on.

These stories truly do draw us together to remind us of our pasts, help us to learn about our child's present, and to think about our future and how we can play an active part in making it better.

The next section, *New Additions - New Possibilities*, discusses some ways in which we are trying to further improve communication.

### New Additions - New Possibilities

In the last two years, two new additions have complemented the Home and School Journal, the Literacy Links Newspaper and a Parent-Teacher Journal component.

First, in 1996, I initiated a Literacy Links Newspaper, first at the school-wide level and then in 1997, at the classroom level. The first issue (Appendix D), along with a parent survey inquiring about possible parent workshops, was the springboard for a parenting workshop put on by our school counsellor.

In 1997, my focus narrowed to the classroom level, where upcoming classroom activities were discussed and some student work was highlighted. Our next issue will discuss how writer's workshop functions within our classroom and display a feature area where each child has his/her own work featured. Each issue will have the general section which will be the same for all, but thanks to computer technology, the feature area will be personalized for each child, so his/her personal copy will have a more lengthy story and drawing authored and illustrated by him/her. This particular issue will feature a major castle unit we have just completed.

This addition will help students to further celebrate their successes and get them more involved with computer technology. Several parents have offered to help.

The second addition to the actual journal is the parent-teacher journal which was introduced in January of 1998.

Its purpose, as the letter states (Appendix E), gives parents the opportunity to ask more specific questions, as they arise, and to keep the teacher informed of important happenings at home.

The intent was not that each parent write each week, but it has been valuable in

clarifying questions parents have about our program, and in sharing significant events that have affected their children. I introduced the parent component in November, because I still believe that the student journal should be the main focus.

Even though the Parent-Teacher Journal is very new, it has already initiated several ongoing conversations about a child's progress and as already stated, several questions seeking clarification about our program and personal events which could affect the child's ability to concentrate on school work, have been discussed.



## Conclusion

The Home and School Journal has proven to be a very positive link between the student, parent and teacher. I hope this description will provide information and perhaps, inspiration, for teachers who are also seeking ways to build such relationships.

Even if this document only sparks a new idea for interested educators, as those of Brick (1993) and Finnegan (1997) did for me, or reinforces what teachers are already doing, it will be well worth the effort.

The research I have done has further enhanced how I may continue to add more components into my program. I would definitely like to build a parent workshop program within our school, so parents can actively experience the kind of learning expectations and formats that their children are encountering everyday.

In the end, children, parents, and teachers are richer for participating in this shared journey.

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Part III  
Appendix A  
Journal Sample Pages

September 15, 1993

Dear Parents:

This year we are implementing a Home and School Journal in Grade 2. The purpose of this project is:

- i) to establish communication between the home and school on a more frequent and continuous basis.
- ii) to invite parents to follow-up at home what has been introduced at school by talking, choosing and reading books which pertain to the topic.
- iii) to increase your child's ownership of his/her learning.
- iv) for your child to plan, carry-out, assess and celebrate their own learning.

At the beginning of the week, your child will write a letter to the teacher who will then respond. This letter could be about an area of interest, a personal experience, or some topic the child wants to know more about.

During the week, your child will fill out the top part of the form. On Friday, your child will write you a letter about their week's learning experiences. **PLEASE RETURN THE DUOTANG EACH MONDAY.**

We invite you to respond to your child's letter in the bottom right hand section.

On the back of this page is a "sample" letter which might give you a better idea about your response.

Thank you!

Janice Sheets  
Grade 2 Teacher

# Home and School Journal

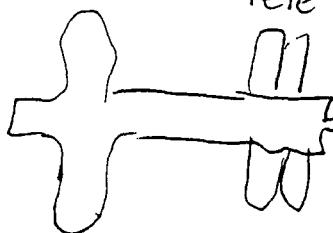
(Letter #1)



Dear "Teacher,"

have you ever have  
a bad dream before

Dear dad thank you  
for bying the  
air plane for  
us from "Pete"



Dear "Student"

I think everybody has bad  
dreams, even adults. I think  
adults are more used to having  
them, so they don't take bad  
dreams so seriously. I  
don't remember many of  
the dreams I have, but I  
know I do have them  
sometimes.

"Teacher"

Dear "Pete"

You are welcome. Now that we  
have a new hobby, we will  
spend more time together. You  
& your brothers have been a  
great help in this project.  
Thank you.

Dad will have to learn to  
fly the plane first before  
I can be your trainer,  
so be patient.

Dad

# Home and School Journal

(Letter #2)



Dear "Teacher",  
 My dads airplane  
 crashed yesterday  
 Because there were  
 no traners yesterday  
 and my dad tride to  
 take of but it  
 fell on its wing.  
 From "Pete"

Dear dad I like  
 your efert ih  
 working so hard  
 for geting the  
 money forthe  
 plane

Sincerely  
 Pete

Dear "Pete"  
 I hope the plane wasn't  
 too badly damaged. Is your  
 dad able to fix it? It sounds  
 like the plane has become  
 a family project. Did you  
 know Mr. Fisher flies airplanes  
 too?

It is great to see you  
 trying so hard in school.

Your "Teacher"

Dear "Pete"  
 I am happy to know that  
 you appreciate my effort  
 to provide for our family.

I hope you will treasure  
 the plane and we will  
 have lots of fun together.

Keep up the good work  
 at school. What are you  
 getting better at?

Dad.

# Home and School Journal

<p>Dear _____</p>	<p>Dear _____</p>
<p>Dear _____</p>	<p>Dear _____</p>

Home and School Journal

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

The form is a square divided into four quadrants by a vertical and a horizontal line. The title "Home and School Journal" is at the top, with a string of lights bordering the entire page. Each quadrant contains a "Dear" prompt followed by a blank line for a name.



Appendix B  
Monthly Class News

d E e F f G g H h I i J j K k L l M m N n

**CLASS NEWS**

**LOOK WHAT'S HAPPENING  
THIS MONTH**

SPECIAL TOPICS WE'RE  
STUDYING

EVENTS FOR THIS  
MONTH

THREE CHEERS  
FOR...



JUST A  
REMINDER

Appendix C

Celebration Page



## Appendix D

Literacy Links: Newspaper &amp; Questionnaire

**PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE  
WE NEED YOUR FEEDBACK**

**Please fill this in and return as soon as possible so we are able to organize some special evenings for you and your child.**

**Parenting Workshops**

**We are prepared to offer a workshop or two from the following topics. Please \* your top two, but choose any or all.**

- \_\_ Friendship skills**
- \_\_ Conflict Resolution**
- \_\_ Parenting**
- \_\_ Cooperative learning strategies**
- \_\_ Prosocial skills**
- \_\_ Coping with change**
- \_\_ Setting boundaries**

**\_\_ Reading- So How Can I Help? A practical workshop on helping your child read.**

**\_\_ Writing- Process and Product. What should I see and how can I help my child?**

**PLEASE SEND YOUR FORM BACK TO THE OFFICE.  
THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!**

# LITERACY LINKS FOR PARENTS

## Our Partners in Learning

### Our Home and School Connection



Vol.1

#### So What Is Literacy Links?

By Janice Sheets

As an educator and a parent, I have always felt it is very important to keep parents informed about what their children are doing in school. As adults we tend to parent as we were parented and likewise, tend to think of schooling as we were schooled, but things have changed!

I have implemented the Home and School Journal as one method of communication, which provides a weekly link between the child and teacher,

and parent and child. Now I would like to invite you to write to me with your concerns and questions as another component within the journal. In January, I will add a section to your child's journal which will be a place for me to explain about our program and possible ways we can work together to help your child feel successful. Each month we will also have an edition of the LITERACY LINKS paper. I will include information about programming and update you on what we are doing. There will be a section completed by the students as well. I certainly welcome any ideas

you have for future issues. I believe that together, we can make a difference! At the beginning of the project, I would like to send out a brief questionnaire to find out what your interests are. In the New Year, I will offer a parent workshop which will give you the opportunity to experience what your child experiences in the reader's and writer's workshop format. Dates and times will be part of our second volume. I hope this will grow into another way in which we can keep each other informed about what is important.

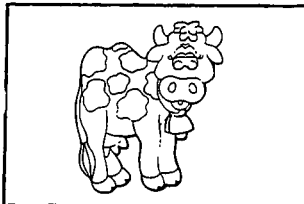
#### Udderly Awesome

#### CIRCLE OF WRITERS

#### Haiku

There was a girl who  
Was named Sadako and made  
One thousand paper cranes  
Scott Malimberg

Theme:  
Sadako and the  
Thousand Paper Cranes



Sadako made one  
Thousand cranes so she would get  
Better but didn't

In the hospital  
Sadako sitting alone  
Folding hope cranes

Do not take life for  
Granted for we are very  
Fortunate to be

Hope to the world Death  
Will not come just miracles  
Answers peace and prayers

Sadako's friends made  
A memorial for her  
In hope of world peace

Kids made cranes for peace  
The cranes bring miracles they  
Prayed for no more wars

Cranes are made in hope  
To cure and stop all fighting  
Among all people

Huge shadowy rock  
Fell on a grave- stone horrid  
Ugly looking place  
Tyler Layng

When Americans  
Dropped the Nuclear bomb on  
Japan, people died

A Nuclear bomb  
Hit Japan and gave lots of  
People leukemia

A Nuclear bomb  
Dropped on Japan and killed  
Many many people

Sadako was a  
Girl who was affected by  
The nuclear bomb

Caring Sadako  
Made one thousand paper cranes  
And a miracle



#### WEBSITES FOR KIDS

Cards: <http://www.bluemountain.com/>

Ontario Library Service:  
<http://www.sols.on.ca/information.kids.html>

#### WHAT ARE WE

#### WRITING ABOUT?

In January we will be working on a unit all castles. If you have any books, pictures, or games about this topic or related ideas and are able to send them to school, thank you!





**HELP WANTED  
ON TUESDAY  
DEC. 16**

If you are a 'crafty'  
parent and could donate  
your morning and/or a  
craft idea along with  
supplies to make 12  
projects, please let  
Mrs. Sheets know this  
week.  
**THANKS!**

**PARENTS'  
CORNER**

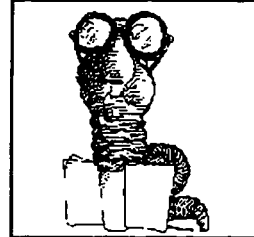


THIS COLUMN WILL BE A  
PLACE FOR PARENTS TO  
SHARE IDEAS THAT HAVE  
WORKED FOR THEM AT HOME  
IN HELPING THEIR CHILD  
SUCCEED IN SCHOOL.

WHEN INTERESTING IDEAS  
OR QUESTIONS ARE BROUGHT  
UP IN THE HOME AND  
SCHOOL JOURNAL, THEY MAY  
BE PRINTED HERE WITH  
YOUR OKAY. PERHAPS A  
QUESTION OF THE MONTH  
MIGHT HELP.

**BOOKS**

**BOOKS  
BOOKS  
BOOKS**



**THIS MONTH WE  
ARE READING A  
BOOK CALLED  
"MAMA'S GOING TO  
BUY YOU A  
MOCKINGBIRD"  
IT IS A POIGNANT  
STORY OF A YOUNG  
BROTHER AND SISTER  
WHO HAVE TO DEAL  
WITH THE ILLNESS  
IF THEIR FATHER.  
Ask your child about it.**

**More Udderly  
Awesome  
Writing!**



A misty mansion  
On monster road, a nervous  
Voice, was calling, BOO!  
*Kristen Sikura*

On Halloween night  
All wet and dusty and damp  
I saw a black cat

The snake slithers through  
The valley hissing as he  
Goes hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss  
*Liam Shanks*

One dark windy night  
In a very old mansion  
Lived scary old witch

A black bat gliding  
Through a black night in a cry  
In a gloomy moon

A creepy monster  
As yellow as he can be  
He didn't scare me

I was at my house  
When I saw it I reached in  
It got me. Help! Ahhhh!  
*Shay Krepf*

On a scary night  
I saw a scary goblin  
I was very scared  
*Jordan Dueck*

An Abandoned ghost  
Floating in the hall talking  
About Halloween

A creak in the wind  
What a scary fright to hear  
A damp grave yard, ahhh!

On a black night a  
Halloween Spirit rises  
Up! Up! From it's grave!  
*Danielle Featherstone*

One dark windy night  
I saw a tomb green and white  
I ran with a spell

In the scary moon  
Skeletons come out to haunt  
Make sure you don't squeak!  
*Megan Armstrong*

Weird pumpkins on the  
Steps of the house on the street  
Glowing bright wild flames

On a spooky street  
I met a ghostly spirit  
Then I ran away

Owl floats across night  
Touching all stars in his way  
And flies out of sight.



## Appendix E

### Parent-Teacher Journal

# THE PARENT-TEACHER JOURNAL

*Dear Parents,*

*Over the last six years since I started writing Home and School Journals with my classes, I often ask parents through questionnaires and in person what they would like to see added to the project. Every year, many parents have wanted another section added which would provide parents with a regular vehicle for writing to me.*

*Often when the journal comes home and conversations arise from what is written, parents think of questions, ideas and comments that would add to their understanding of classroom curricula, routines and happenings. I would like to hear from you more regularly than our parent-teacher interviews and this section will be the starting point for such contact.*

*Please feel free to write as often as you like and I will respond to your notes and letters as I do your child's. Through our journalling I hope we will both be able to give your child the support that is needed to make this year a great success.*

*Each month we will also be publishing a newspaper with student work and curriculum information which I hope will be of interest to you. We could use any computer expertise that you have to accomplish this.*

*I am looking forward to hearing from you with your ideas, questions and concerns about your child's education.*

*Sincerely,*

*Janice Sheets*