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DIALOGUE JOURNALS:  
TALKING ABOUT LEARNING THROUGH  
WRITING

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
RESEARCHER STANCE .....	1
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH.....	14
THIS YEAR'S STORY .....	20
Drama – Sharing Our Feelings .....	24
Meet Julie .....	31
Meet David .....	31
First Directed Writing Experience .....	32
Linda's Writing .....	33
Allie's Writing.....	35
Julie's Writing .....	36
David's Writing .....	37
Second Directed Writing Experience .....	38
Mitch's Writing .....	39
Julie's Writing .....	40
Julie's Extra Writing .....	42
Julie's Self Reflection .....	43
David's Writing .....	43
High Frequency Words.....	44
Dialogue Journals.....	45
David's Writing .....	51
Julie's Writing .....	52
Back-To-School Night .....	54
"I Commend You" .....	56
"What do I do? Who do I listen to?" .....	57
Second Journal Entry.....	59
David's Writing .....	62
Allie's Writing.....	63
Julie's Writing .....	64
"Happy" .....	65
November Already? .....	66
Cassie Corresponding with Mom .....	68
Linda Corresponding with Dad .....	69
Independence .....	71

“What do I do while I write?” .....	72
Searching for Help .....	73
Julie’s Writing .....	74
David’s Writing .....	75
Thinking Checklist .....	75
High Five Thinking! .....	78
Sue’s Writing.....	79
Collaboration .....	80
Joey’s Writing .....	80
One-On-One Guidance.....	82
David’s Writing .....	82
Casey’s Writing .....	83
Julie’s Writing .....	84
Julie’s Feelings.....	85
“Growing in Confidence” .....	86
Julie and David .....	87
Julie’s Writing .....	87
David’s Writing .....	88
Chanting! .....	89
 ANALYSIS .....	 90
 FINDINGS .....	 93
 REFLECTIVE PRACTICE .....	 107
 WORK CITED .....	 113
 APPENDICES	
A Principal Consent Form.....	115
B Parent / Guardian Consent Form.....	116
C Adult Participant Consent Form.....	117
D Letter to Parents Inside Journal .....	118

## RESEARCHER STANCE

Education provides an environment for development and guidance for children to becoming life long learners. Elementary school is the foundation and stepping-stone for many of life's skills. Children must learn reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as survival and social skills. Each day children enter the classrooms of America to learn to be well-rounded individuals and productive citizens.

As a teacher I strive to offer and provide my students a diverse and equitable education. I believe that every teacher enters the classroom with his or her own philosophy on how children learn. Each teacher also brings his or her own life experiences into the classroom. A teacher's educational biography can be evident in the teacher's mannerisms and classroom structure.

Elementary school was a very difficult time in my own life. In first grade my reading teacher told me I would never learn how to read and that I should give up. And so, I gave up! Well that is, I gave up until I was in eighth grade, and my reading teacher told me I could read, and she taught me how. After I finished eighth grade, I promised myself I was going to be a teacher. I wanted to be just like my eighth grade teacher and instill the love of reading in all of my students.

At the start of my teaching career I taught the school's required curriculum, but reading remained my focus. I wanted to make sure all students concluded the school year as students who loved to read and were confident

readers. I found I was often building confident readers but ineffective writers. I was devoting so much time making sure that my first grade children were reading that I was neglecting writing.

Normally, I would provide students limited free writing time. The majority of the writing in the first half of the school year would be for projects where they were usually given sentence starters to guide them. I would give the children lists of words or phrases to choose from to complete their sentences and wait until later in the school year to offer the children independent writing activities. Primarily, I directed their writing. The only independent writing the children completed was in their daily journals. Typically in January or February, I would begin to discuss the writing process and introduce the concept of writer's workshop. The children would watch a movie called *Get Writing – A Kid's Guide to Writing and Publishing* that is based on the book *A Guide for Young Authors* by Joy Crowley. Both clearly describe the writing process and highlight the important components needed to make a story interesting. I would also read *Arthur Writes a Story* by Marc Brown. We would then begin to write our own stories. I would distribute paper and ask students to develop an interesting story. They went from completely directed writing activities to instantly needing to develop a topic on their own and write about it. The children would struggle to get any information down on the paper, and then I would sit with them and help them add more detail and interesting components to their stories. Each of the



children would continue to write stories that would eventually be edited and revised to create final drafts. Finally, in May each child would choose his or her favorite story to publish for our Author's Tea. During the tea, the children's parents visit our classroom as an audience while the children read their stories aloud. By the time the children completed all the tasks involved for our Author's Tea event, I felt I had unintentionally taken away what the children wanted to say. I pushed them to write more and to be more creative, and many of the stories evolved with so much input from me that they became my stories, not theirs.

My undergraduate college courses had failed to address how to implement or teach writing in a first grade classroom, so I learned how to teach writing on my own. I did not agree with my district's writing philosophy to delay until January or February to teach writing. I started looking at research and journal articles about writing, the writing process, and the developmental stages of writing. Strickland and Morrow (1989) argue that writing and reading instruction should be integrated, and children can learn how to read and write through their own writing. "When young children write, the interrelationship among reading, writing, listening, and speaking are obvious. What they learn from one aspect of language arts is used to explore and develop the others" (p. 427).

At this point, I was not providing my students an effective writing education. Robert Fulgham may have introduced the theory that everything we needed to know we learned in Kindergarten. But I wanted my students to believe

everything we need to write in life, we learned how to write in first grade. Could I possibly implement something into my classroom that would allow my students to write earlier in the year and allow their reading and writing skills to grow simultaneously?

I decided I was waiting too long to help children experience writing. I agree with Avery's (1993) beliefs that "... young children *can* write, young children *want* to write and young children possess the knowledge, interest, and experiences to write about" (p. 90). I wanted my students to gain confidence writing earlier in the academic year before I guided them to start writing stories. I noticed that I was asking them to add more detail to their stories and be more creative when many of the children were struggling to compose the sentences. I felt I actually hindered their learning by giving them lists and guides because I was not allowing them to think for themselves. By continually providing a place to find the correct spelling, they did not know how to try to spell words on their own. They would not allow themselves to use inventive spelling because they did not want to be wrong. I was doing my best to make them independent workers, but I was enabling them when it came to writing. Last year, I had the children writing more often and earlier in the year to attempt to get them to be more confident to write on their own.

Judith LeVine (2002), a kindergarten teacher in Australia, describes different writing activities she does with her class to develop proficient writers

including daily messages, journals, letters to Tommy Bear, and pen pals.

LeVine's students all have a personal response journal, and each week they write a letter to a family member about something they did in school. They are instructed to end the letter with a question, which allows the parents to be able to write back to the children. In the beginning of the year, Ms. LeVine has upper grade helpers come to her classroom and write what the kindergarten students want to say. The kindergarteners sign the letter. As the year progresses, the children begin to independently write their own letters in their response journal to their parents without the older students' help.

I thought this was one of the greatest ideas I had ever heard! This would be a perfect way to maintain a consistent and beneficial dialogue between school and home. The students could write to their families about what they were doing or what was going on in their classroom, and the parent could write back. The parents might feel more informed, and the students might appreciate a stronger interest from parents about their education. Bode (1988) explains that "Dialogue journal writing can be viewed as an extension of the language experience approach in that it not only requires decoding of written conversation by the student but encoding as well. The journal provides the functional use of written language in a meaningful context with the opportunity for open-ended expression. Students writing to their teacher or parents have a significant audience who also serve as supporters for written expression" (p. 4). The response journal would

offer an opportunity for authentic writing as well as a permanent record of each child's progress and growth.

After reading about LeVine's classroom, I was ready to run out to the store and buy all my children a book to keep as their response journal. I went to school the next day and talked to several colleagues about the journals, and they seemed interested. I wanted desperately to start my year over to implement response journals! While I was not able to restart the school year, I decided that at least I could provide the opportunity now in my classroom. I spent several days with my students discussing letter writing and helping them to express themselves through letters.

It was now the holiday season of 2002, and nearly every American was undoubtedly affected by the fighting overseas. The children all seemed to know someone who had been sent to the Middle East and several of my colleagues had sons or husbands there as well. The children were always talking about the soldiers, so I thought they would appreciate writing a letter to them. Before we wrote, I showed the children a picture of another teacher's son and his platoon in Afghanistan. My students enjoyed writing the letter especially because they had an image of their target audience. I was surprised when they wanted to know how long it would be until the soldiers wrote back to them. It saddened me the children were expecting a response, because I did not think the soldiers would be able to respond.

When we returned to school after the holiday break I wanted to try to give the children an interactive communication, so I thought each child could begin to write a letter to his or her parents about school. Since we had been learning about Martin Luther King Jr., I thought we could write about him, with the hopes that their parents would respond. I gave the children a piece of stationary bordered with people from around the world holding hands to write their letter on. When the students were composing their letters, I encouraged them to ask their parents to write back. I also talked to them about the possibility of adding letter writing in journals to our weekly routine. They seemed to like the idea, and a few students even cheered. When we sent this letter home, I wrote a quick note to the parents informing them that soon the children would be bringing journals home. Over the next day or two, a few students brought back their letters from their parents to show me. Several others told me their parents had written back to them, but that they had kept the letter at home. I was excited so many parents wrote back to the children. In turn, the children became increasingly interested in writing in their response journals. The following week I gave my students their response journal, so we could keep our correspondences together.

My original objective for the response journals was to have the parents correspond with their children. I expected the parents would welcome everything the children wrote and they would write back in a positive, legible way. Instead, some of the parents wrote back in script, which was extremely difficult for the

children to understand. Some parents made the children correct spelling errors in their writing, which made them upset. I hoped the parents would take time to sit with their child to experience and appreciate the child's abilities in reading and writing. Unfortunately, some parents did not embrace the opportunity to participate in their child's education and growth and failed to praise the child for their accomplishments. Calkins and Bellino (1997) indicated, "There is probably no curricular subject that creates as much anxiety for parents as writing, and this is no surprise. When a child writes, he puts his thoughts on a page. Writing reveals the child to the world, . . . his spelling, his handwriting, his grammar" (p. 162). It is very important for me that my students feel comfortable in what they are doing in the classroom and with homework activities outside of the classroom. I was concerned that writing letters to their parents might not be the most educationally sound experience for all my students unless the parents were truly supportive.

To maintain the students' interest in writing, I contemplated modifying the response journals. I could serve as their audience and correspond with them. They would be learning through reading and writing, and we would still have documentation of their progress and growth. However, if I made this change, I would lose the crucial connection to the home that I was working so hard to develop. Because many of my students' parents work long hours and have little time to sit and chat about their day, I hoped that the response journals could

potentially lead to the children and their parents spending some of the short time they had together learning.

How could I implement the response journals and still maintain a positive writing experience? I wanted my students to use this journal as a way to learn from themselves and also to learn from others. I wanted the parents to write back using the words that the child might have used originally with invented spelling. If the children were to see the word written back with a standard spelling, there might be a greater chance for the child to learn the standard spelling in context of a letter. Bode's (1989) research focused on an adult corresponding without correcting any mistakes in the child's entry. Focus was placed on meaningful communication rather than on direct literacy instruction. In the first grade study, the adult was encouraged to model the correct spelling of those words for which the child had invented a spelling. Correct usage of written conventions was also encouraged by example. I hoped for the same to occur for my students and their parents. However, I must admit that I worried a great deal about allowing the children to use inventive spelling, because I wondered how the school district's parents might perceive it. My previous attempt with the response journal had suggested that some parents did not approve or see the benefit of using inventive spelling. Machado (1995) agrees with Field and Leo that "Inventive spelling serves as an important stage in the process of deciphering the sound-symbol system of written language" (p. 344). I thought back to when I started teaching,

and I recalled the veteran first grade teachers who felt that the children's writing should not be seen until the teacher had first corrected it. Coming into teaching first grade with a background in early childhood education, I felt it was important to let children express themselves. Clay (1975) expresses the importance of children writing. "For children who learn to write at the same time as they learn to read, writing plays a significant part in the early reading process" (p. 70). These journals could give my students the opportunity to express themselves no matter what their individual ability level and to learn from their own writing experience.

Even though it was still important for me to maintain the risk free environment and ensure a positive experience, the following week I decided to have the children attempt to write to their parents again. Dewey (1938) believes "The experience of young children centers about persons and the home" (p. 82). Wanting to help the parents help their child, I decided to write a letter explaining how I would hope they might respond.

Dear Parents,

Our class has decided to start a family journal. Each week the children will write a letter to you about school. They will reach deep into their brains and try their hardest to spell words correctly. We know that all the words will not be perfect, but we are growing and learning more every day. When the children bring their book home, please sit with them so they can read to you what they wrote. Take care not to correct children's spelling because they did their best.

When you write back to your child, please sit with him or her and have the child read what you wrote. Please remember to print your letter so your child can read it. It would also be great if you would try to use a



word your child might have spelled incorrectly so he or she can see and read the correct spelling. This increases the chance of a correct spelling the next time your child attempts the word.

I know we are all very busy, but this journal will give a special time together of reading and writing personal ideas. Each week you will see your child growing as a reader and writer. At the end of the year, it will be a wonderful memory book of what we accomplished in first grade.

Happy Journaling!

Throughout the rest of the school year, the children seemed to be having a better experience communicating with their parents in the journal. All of the parents did their best to follow my suggestions. In fact, one mother surprised me because when she sat with her son to read the journal, she had him highlight the words that they both used in their letters. I liked the idea of focusing on the words that both parent and child had used. However, I did not want him to be frustrated by looking at all the highlighted words, so he and I sat down to discuss his feelings. He said he did not feel badly with the words highlighted because he was seeing progress each week, and there were fewer misspelled words.

The school year ended, and I began to think how these journals could be introduced earlier in the school year. I worried about the children's ability to write in the beginning of the year, but I hoped they would have the confidence to try. I also thought it would be beneficial to document the growth of their writing from the beginning to the end of the school year. I spent my summer reading articles, doing research, and talking with colleagues, parents of former students, and friends about my ideas.

When the beginning of my next school year arrived, I was excited and eager to answer my question, “What are the observed and reported experiences of students and parents using a dialogue journal?” Through the journal I would provide students an opportunity to write for a real purpose to a real audience. So often we write in school just to meet the teacher’s objectives. In their journals, the children would need to write clearly so their corresponding adult could understand their writing. Staton (1980) explained, “Writing to a real person who is interested enough in what is said to write back and give her or his own ideas would seem to be a good way to develop a student’s ability to state ideas and describe events” (p. 516). Hence, I hoped that the journals would provide increased parent communication in an educationally interactive process. The parents would provide an active, participating voice to guide their children’s learning.

Each child’s dialogue journal would serve as a collection of writings. As Calkins (1994) suggests, “We need time to reflect and to make meaning from what we collect, and our students need it as well” (p. 326). During individual conferences we would reflect on the child’s growth through authentic assessment to determine and document ways to attend to the child’s progress. We looked at individual growth in correct usage of high frequency words, hearing sounds within words, attempting spellings, and/or searching for references independently. As necessary, enrichment assessment was included for organization of writing,

penmanship, capitalization, and possibly punctuation. Each journal would become a collection of material learned and other experiences in first grade that were most important to the individual.

So much excitement about this process caused a bit of apprehension as well. I expended a great deal of time and energy to make this a positive experience for my students. As I prepared to implement the journals in my classroom, I was still filled with questions. What if the children's invented spelling offended the parents? To ensure the parents were comfortable with the invented spelling, I would address this topic with them during Back-To-School night. I would explain that allowing children to try on their own gives them a chance to build confidence and become independent thinkers. When the children are given the spelling of a word, they have no experience encoding the word.

I also wondered if the experience might become uncomfortable for the child due to the parents or their ability to write. The children might become discouraged and choose not to write because of their limitations and frustrations. For those children, I would help by providing a sentence starter or offer a friend to help. If the child felt pressure from a parent or was uncomfortable writing to Mom, Dad, or a guardian, I would propose the child write to me or to the aide in our classroom. If for some reason whoever the child is communicating with stops, I would correspond with the children until the adult is able to write again. Would I be able to identify which student does not want to write because of a

parent and which student does not want to write because of his or her limitations or the mechanics of writing? The only way I would be able to know why a student was hesitant to write would be through our interviews and conferences where we discuss the writing experience.

It was very important to me to maintain a risk free environment and to create a positive experience for my students. Introducing a new concept can cause apprehension and excitement at the same time. The best advice I gave myself was to keep my eyes open and be alert to possible obstacles. I also received help, guidance, and positive reinforcement from my research colleagues. Everything said and done in the process of maintaining dialogue journals would be a learning experience for me as well as the children, and I was ready to embrace it.

### **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

As I mentioned earlier children often write in school for the teacher's purpose or to an unknown audience. The purpose and intention of my research study was to offer my students a real audience and a real purpose for their writing experience. I wanted to determine what would happen if the children in my classroom were given the chance to write to their parents regularly about school,

so I asked, “What are the observed and reported experiences of students and parents using a dialogue journal?”

Before I started any research in my classroom, I presented my proposal to my teacher research group and to Moravian College’s Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB). With board approval, I was ready to begin.

I asked students to write a letter in their journals to a willing adult highlighting or reflecting on what they learned in school that week. The willing adult could be a family member, guardian, teacher, or another agreed-upon adult in the student’s life. All of my students chose to correspond with one of their parents. However, if at any time the participating adult could not respond to the child, I would offer to correspond with the child until the adult was able to resume.

Once each week, typically on a Wednesday morning, we would devote approximately forty minutes for our journal writing experience. As the students gained confidence in choosing a topic and writing independently in their journals, the time decreased to 25 –30 minutes. At home each student read his or her letter to the participating adult who would then write a response. The student would then read what the adult had just written. The following writing time the students would review their most recent journal entry, the response from the cooperating adult, and initiated a new dialogue with their correspondent.

While the children were writing in their journals, they also communicated with each other, my classroom aide, and me. They guided each other through the layout of the journal, a topic to write about, and the spelling of words.

As the teacher researcher, I documented the progress using primarily qualitative methods and collected data through the following means:

**Field Notes** – I documented all observations during my study by writing anecdotal notes on a classroom clipboard. Sagor (2000) commented, “Whenever you witness an event that may be relevant to the topic you are researching, jot it down” (p. 81). My documentations primarily occurred during participant observations where the children were writing on a given topic or in their journals. I also kept field notes of my interactions with them as they wrote. Since many of my observations were made while the children were writing, my notes included educational strategies and implementations for individualized, small group, or the whole group instructions. I kept field notes every time there was a whole group experience in writing, which usually occurred every Wednesday morning. I also kept field notes during my interviews, as well as any time I observed a child writing, or if I received supplemental writing from a child. To record the changes the children made while writing in their journals, I kept field notes as well as small journal notes that were attached to the students’ work when it was added to my student work log.

**Field Log** - All of my observations, field notes, and photocopies of student work were then assembled into a detailed narrative with reflections to become my field log. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) remind the qualitative researcher, “the log is a tool, a way ‘in’ to an ongoing exploration. From it we rethink, undo, and reshape the ongoing research process and products” (p. 18). At least once each week, I added notes to my field log. Each time I also wrote a detailed narrative from my anecdotal notes of the experiences in my classroom. As I wrote I also added observer comments, personal reflections, and comments to guide changes in my practice. As suggested by Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997), I bracketed my observer comments as to “not ignore or put out of our minds our responses to experience but to articulate them and deliberately distance ourselves to look at them” (p. 351). Throughout my study I continually focused on the events in the classroom and what the children were experiencing to ensure I was providing an educationally sound experience. Each time I reflected on my teaching and the classroom, I wrote a reflective memo and added it to my log. The memos focused my thought process throughout the study; for example they focused on lessons I taught to strengthen the knowledge of high frequency words, responsive writing or letter format. I also wrote reflective memos that expressed my feelings throughout the study and my thoughts about the opinions people shared. There was no set schedule to writing entries. I completed them as needed.

**Interviews** – The emotions and self-esteem of my students are very important to me. To ensure I considered these throughout the study, I conducted two interviews: one in the beginning of the study, and another one toward the end. Sagor (2000) believes, “The time the researcher is investing tells them someone really cares about what they think; nevertheless, the respondent’s time must be respected” (p. 107). When I asked the children how they felt about writing, I followed interview guidelines from Sagor (2000) to keep my interview on track. Typically I interviewed the whole class at once and accomplished the task in forty minutes. When necessary I also had short conversations, or interviews, with individual children about their writing growth. During all the interviews, I transcribed verbatim as well as reported the children’s obvious body language.

**Students’ Work** – Each time I took field notes, I copied and saved the children’s work. MacLean and Mohr (1999) express the importance that “student work may be the centerpiece of your data, helping you to understand and interpret all the rest” (p. 47). Throughout the study, if a student shared with me extra writing he or she did during free time or at home, I also copied, dated, and saved the supplemental pieces. Clay (1994) stresses the importance that a teacher “knows an individual child’s progress to date. She must keep samples of work arranged chronologically and must work hard at understanding what the child is trying to say in his written expression” (p. 15). Students’ writings were assembled under each of their pseudonym names and arranged in chronological



order in a special section of my field log that I designated student work log. If necessary, I attached a small journal note to a writing sample, which explained a lesson I might implement for the whole class, small group, or individual lessons based on the class and students' needs.

**Correspondents' Writing** – Since the children were corresponding with a significant adult in their life, I felt it was also important to copy and keep each correspondent's writing. Each child decided to correspond with a parent. As a result of the research, I kept each parent's response together with his or her child's writing.

Trustworthiness is key to a successful research study. Since my study consisted of two groups of participants, I needed to develop two consent agreements. One agreement, labeled Parent / Guardian Consent Form [included as Appendix B], provided permission for the student to participate in the study. The second agreement, labeled Adult Participant Consent Form, [included as Appendix C] provided permission to use the corresponding adult's written responses in the study. Each student kept a dialogue journal with a willing adult as part of the regular first grade curriculum. I reviewed all the students' entries and conferred with the students to guide their educational development. I received permission for all twenty children and eighteen of the twenty adults to participate in the study. At any time, the child or parent could chose not to participate in this study, he or she or the child's parents could inform me of the

wish to withdraw. None of my participants chose to withdraw from the research. Since all of my students participated and only two parents had chosen not to participate I was able to use writing sample, observations and information from field notes and field log from everyone except the two adults who opted not to participate.

### **THIS YEAR'S STORY**

Writing in the first grade classroom can be difficult, not only for the students but also for the teacher. The teacher needs to not only teach the mechanics of writing but also a variety of genres. Children will often have difficulty writing because they are unsure of what to write or to whom they are writing. Often writing lessons are designed to be whatever a child wants to say to an imaginary audience. Having little or no direction can make the writing process more difficult for a child. Communication between the school and the home can therefore be advantageous and essential. I wanted to provide a real audience and purpose for my students' writing, offering an opportunity for regular communication with the home and documenting the growth of my students' reading and writing abilities through a dialogue journal with a significant adult. I wanted to document how my individual conferences and mini-lessons strengthened the journal writing process. I also wanted to determine if and how the children and their families could benefit from regular communication about

daily classroom activities. My research would share the observed and reported experiences of students and parents using a dialogue journal.

My research took place in my first grade classroom of a K-4 school in a rural bedroom community in northwestern New Jersey. The town has approximately 18,000 residents, and the school is one of two K-4 buildings in the district. The community is comprised of primarily dual income families and upper-middle class white-collar workers. The town has limited commercial and industrial development resulting in one or both parents regularly commuting outside of the county for employment.

This year I have twenty students in my classroom, eleven boys, and nine girls. One of the male students has a full time aide, whom I'll refer to as Mrs. Finkel, who works directly with him and occasionally with other children. Four of my students are new to the district. Of these, two had previous experience in full day kindergarten. The remaining students attended a half-day kindergarten program.

At the beginning of September, I stood in front of the gymnasium waiting for my new group of students to enter on the first day of school. Beside me stood Mrs. Finkel, whom I just met five minutes earlier, learning that she would be an aide for Chris, a special needs child in my classroom. Originally I had been assigned a trained autistic aide who had worked with Chris in previous years. Mrs. Finkel had never worked in a classroom before, and I was unsure how this

day or year was going to progress. I was excited to meet my students. Over the summer, a few had come in to meet me and see our classroom. According to my list, I knew I would have a very young class. Many of them would not turn six years old until at least a month into the school year. As the children started entering the building, I looked for anyone wearing the frog nametag I had mailed to their homes. One by one I greeted them with a smile and a handshake, as I escort them to our line. Each time I moved up and down the line, trying to remember each child's name. I contemplated the new school year, thinking about the children I would be teaching to become more proficient writers. What were their feelings about writing? How would they feel about writing to someone in their dialogue journals?

When all of my students had arrived, we were ready to walk to our classroom together. Before I left the gym, I told them the most important thing to bring each day is their smile. Once I had everyone smiling at me, we started down the hallway. We made our way through the third grade pod and down to the annex. We finally turned the corner to our hallway. The children must have felt the walk was taking forever. I stopped at the door to show them our room. It was the second room on the left as we walked down the hallway. I ask them to find the chair with their name on it, take their backpacks off, put it beside the chair, and sit down. They entered the large room, and most of them just looked around for a moment. The classroom is very long and spacious. My desk is

immediately to their right near the wall. Behind my desk is the computer shelf, which stretches down the wall with three computers. At the end of the shelf is Mrs. Finkel's desk. In the center of the room there are six round tables, each with four chairs. The children's seats are at five of the tables; the sixth table was to be used as an extra work area. In the back of the room is a large kidney-shaped table, which would be used primarily for guided reading or other small group instruction but could also be an extra work area. The children settled into their seats and continue to look around the room and at their new friends.

By the third week of school, the children had become comfortable with the classroom, their friends, and me. I wanted to increase my understanding of the students and their feelings about writing. Some I knew might feel they are wonderful writers, and some may already fear writing something wrong. I felt it was important for me to know each child's opinions. I decided to have a whole group interview. I asked them to join me in a circle on the floor, and we were going to talk as a group about something. I asked them to try their best to be honest with me about their feelings. I wanted to ask them questions about their feelings when it came to writing. I told them there are no right or wrong answers; there are just honest answers. I share our interaction in a brief drama entitled "Sharing our Feelings."

**Drama – “Sharing Our Feelings”**

*The children and I are sitting on the floor in a circle in the front of the classroom.*

Miss Alvarez:

What are your feelings about writing? Who would like to tell me about writing? Do you like it? Do you not like it?

Linda:

I love to write.

Miss Alvarez:

Can you tell me more about that statement?

Linda:

I love to write stories.

Miss Alvarez:

Do you like to write any certain type of stories?

Linda:

No

Andrew:

I like to make comic books. Once I made a comic book for my Grandpa that was about Captain Underpants.

Miss Alvarez:

Did you do it by yourself?

Andrew: *(With a large smile on his face)*

Yeah!

David: *(Shouts)*

Someone had to help you.

Andrew: *(Tilting his head)*

Well sometimes I needed a little help.

Miss Alvarez:

How did you feel when you needed help?

Andrew: *(Straighten his head and smiled)*

Happy

Miss Alvarez:

Andrew, were you happy because you needed help or happy because you got help?

Andrew:

Happy, because I copied the cover

*I call on Casey who is starting to lie back onto the wall*

Casey:

I like to draw comic books.

Miss Alvarez:

What about writing? Do you like to write with your comic books?

Casey:

I have trouble. I wrote a book, Family Guide. Mommy helped.

Miss Alvarez:

How did you feel about Mommy helping you?

Casey: *(Smiling)*

Happy

Joey:

I like to write a story. I once wrote a story about a little boy who got lost in the woods.

Miss Alvarez:

Was the story something that happened to you or did the story start in your head?

Joey:

It just happened in my head.

Miss Alvarez:

Joey, how did you do with your words in your story?

Joey:

A couple of words were kind-of hard but I stuck with it and got the words done.

Miss Alvarez: *(addressed to the whole class)*

Where can you go to get help with a spelling of a word?

Class answered:

Principal!

Vice principal!

Teachers!

Friends!

Picture dictionary!

Stretch the word out!

I was intrigued by the fact that the last response they offered is an important strategy to me. I knew I would really have to help them understand and accept they are capable of attempting words and stretching them out, and they do not have to always go to someone else to find the spelling of words.

I then decided to call on Chris, a special needs child in his first year in a mainstreamed classroom. His aide, Mrs. Finkel was sitting with his caseworker, whom I'll call Mrs. Braid, and they were observing his behavior. Chris usually spent his free time and even some of his work time drawing Spiderman pictures. He loves the movie, and I anticipated that his answer would have something to do with Spiderman.



Miss Alvarez:  
How do you feel about writing?

Chris: *(Smiling)*  
Good!

Miss Alvarez:  
What do you like to write about?

Chris:  
I like to write about the Green Goblin and Spiderman.

*Many of the children laughed or smiled. I guess they were not surprised by his answer either.*

Miss Alvarez:  
Chris, why do you like to write about Spiderman so much?

Chris:  
Because I like to see them fighting.

Miss Alvarez:  
How would you feel if I did not let you write about Spiderman or if I made you write about something else?

Chris:  
Bad

Miss Alvarez:  
Would you be able to write about something else?

Chris does not offer an answer. Usually if this is the case, Chris is finished talking, so I just thanked him for answering and moved on.

Miss Alvarez:  
Julie, how do you feel about writing?

Julie:  
I like to write color words.

Miss Alvarez:  
Why color words, Julie?

Julie:  
Because they're easy

Miss Alvarez:  
Julie, are there any other words that are easy for you to write?

Julie:  
Dog and cat

Miss Alvarez:  
What about names?

Julie: *(looks around at a few of the other children's faces and then smiled at me)*  
Well, yeah, my *name* and *God* because if you turn *dog* around you get *God*.

David: *(shouts)*  
Oh, you took my information with *dog* and *God*; I was going to say that.

Tony:  
I only like to write sometimes because once when I was little I banged the back of my head really hard and now sometimes I forget how to write my letters correctly.

Tony's response caught me by surprise. I was unaware that Tony hurt himself when he was young. I wondered if the story was fabricated. Tony occasionally did transpose his letters and numbers, but he is a first grader and I expected this. The correct way to form letters and numbers is a developmental task, and it is usually not fully mastered at this time of the school year. I wrote a note to myself to call his parents to see if there was any truth to this story.

Miss Alvarez:

Tony, if you are having trouble remembering how to write the letters then would you at that time not like to write?

Tony:

Yes

Kathleen: *(with a large smile on her face)*

I like school.

Miss Alvarez: *(smiling back at her)*

Good, do you like to write in school?

Kathleen:

I like to write in my ABC book.

Miss Alvarez:

Why in your ABC book?

Kathleen:

If you have trouble with a letter all you have to do is trace over it.

Miss Alvarez:

So, you like writing when you have a guide for your writing?

*Kathleen does not offer an answer and the children are now becoming restless, so I decide to end the group interview.*

Miss Alvarez:

Who here just really does not like writing?

*Donna, Cassie, Jack, and Kevin raised their hands.*

Miss Alvarez:

Jack, why do you not like to write?

Jack:

I don't like to get my hands tired.

*A couple of the children laugh. I thanked him for his honest answer and then asked the other three the same question. Donna, Cassie, and Kevin all offered me the same answer that Jack did.*

Miss Alvarez:

Kevin, would you like to write if it was in very small sections?

Kevin:

No

Gina: *calling out*

Sometimes I like to write.

Beth: *calling out*

I like to write.

Kathleen: *calling out*

I like to write.

Andrew: *calling out*

Me three.

Miss Alvarez:

How many of you worry about writing because you are afraid to spell words incorrectly?

*Cassie, Kevin, Nick, Casey, Donna, Sue, Beth, Mitch, Andrew, and David all raised their hands.*

Miss Alvarez:

So then, First Grade, my final question to you is, is it okay if you write something wrong as long as you learn from your mistake later?

Whole class:

Yes!

**Meet Julie**

Julie turned six years old a few days before entering first grade. At the beginning of the year Julie had been very slow completing her work and made little attempt to sound out words. She even struggled to spell her name and repeatedly needed to see the spelling for her to copy. Occasionally Julie would also write her name completely backwards. Julie frequently avoided any attempt to work independently.

During the group interview I expected Julie to say she did not like writing because she had obviously struggled. Julie never really answered if she liked writing or not, but she did say she likes to write the color words. She finds color words easy. I tried to coach her to say that she could write other words. At the time of the interview Julie was improving writing her name and was using a reference less frequently. I wanted her to realize she had experienced success with her own name and I felt she had actually mastered several names and words as well.

**Meet David**

David was noticeably comfortable with the classroom and me at the beginning of the school year. I have known David for a few years as I had taught his older sister. He is six years old and will not turn seven until late in the school year. I spoke with his previous teacher about him being repeatedly silly,

disruptive, and talkative. She just smiled and commented she had experienced similar behaviors from David.

I noticed in the beginning of the year that David was able to decode several words without assistance. I assumed he would be able to successfully encode sounds by himself to spell words. However, I found David struggled to understand what sound came from what letter. He would be able to look at a *t* and give you the sound, but if you said the sound *t* he would not be able to give you the letter. Even though David had struggled with writing, I was still surprised he raised his hand during the group interview to admit he was worried about getting things wrong when writing. David's free spirit behavior in the classroom conflicted with his fear of failure.

### **First Directed Writing Experience**

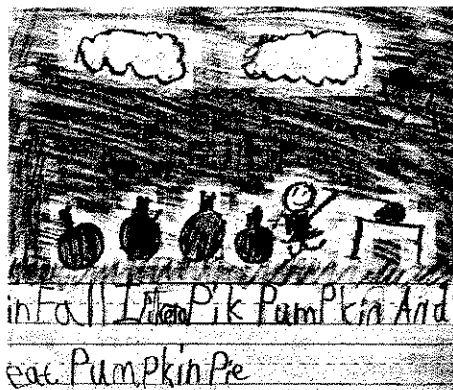
After we finished the group interview, I started our first directed writing activity. We spoke about Fall as our first topic and what special events we think about during Fall. Joey answered, "Halloween," and several others agreed with him. I then asked, "What are the sounds of Fall?" Students called out a variety of answers, including crows and crunching leaves.

I informed them that Mrs. Finkel and I would only help them "stretch out" their words if necessary. When we stretch out a word, we pretend we have a rubber band in our hands. We slowly say the word while stretching our rubber

band to hear each sound. I helped them stretch out the words *Fall* and *Autumn*. I reminded them that when you write, you could stretch out the words like we just did. I said, “It is okay to spell the words wrong as long as . . .” and before I could finish the class started to say, “we learn from it.” I have said in the past that mistakes are only mistakes if you make them again. But if you learn from what you have done, when you spell a word wrong the next time you spell it, you could get closer to the correct spelling. I was so excited the children seem to remember this because they finished my sentence using my words.

I told them that now they could write whatever they wanted about Fall. I handed each child a half sheet of 12” X 18” lined story paper with the top part left blank for illustrations. I cut the sheet in half to reduce the space available for writing. I told them they could choose to write or draw a picture as their first step. They were to do whatever would help them compose their thoughts on paper. The children began to work. Several of them got up from their tables and got their picture dictionaries out of their cubbies to search for words. Several others started drawing their picture.

### Linda's Writing



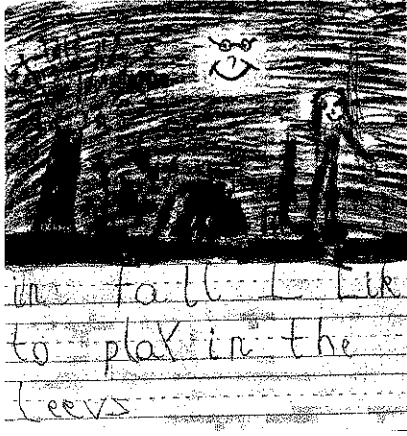
In fall I like to pick pumpkins and eat pumpkin pie

Linda came to me with her picture dictionary and asked me to help her find *pumpkin*. I asked her to stretch the word out. We worked through *p – u – m – p – c*. I smiled and pointed to her dictionary. I asked her, “Why don’t you look in your book for the letters you already think spell *pumpkin* and see if you can find it.” She looked down at the index of words and dragged her finger down the list of *p* words, and her finger stopped just below *pumpkin*. She looked at me, smiled, and walked back to her table.

I was proud of Linda for writing so much on her own. She only asked me about the spelling for pumpkin. Once she and I worked through the beginning letters, and she found it in the picture dictionary, she completed the remainder of her words on her own. Linda did a wonderful job writing a complete sentence and hearing all of the sounds within her words. She has some capitals mixed in but most of them are *p* and that usually occurs because of children being confused about line placement for the letter.

I moved about the room to see how the students were progressing and to determine who needed help. As I began to do so, Tony raised his hand wanting to know if what he wrote had to be a sentence. I told him it could be whatever he wanted to write. There was no wrong answer as long as he tried to write something.



Allie's Writing

<p>In fall I like to play in the leaves</p>
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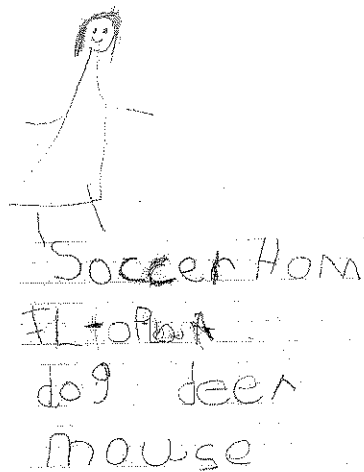
I walked past Allie and noticed she wrote *in Fall I Lik to pla in the leevz*. I knelt down next to Allie and tried to direct her to add the *y* to the end of her word *play*. I asked her who has to walk at the end of the word for *a* to say *ae*? She picked up her pencil and wrote an *e* at the end of the word. I attempted to alter my explanation to Allie as Kevin and Casey returned to the room from their Basic Skills Math instruction. I knew they would require individualized instruction to start their writing, so I left Allie with her inventive spelling.

A while later, when I was working with another child, Allie walked up with her paper. I noticed she now had spelled *play* correctly. Even though her *y* was backwards I was happy to see she now had it right. I asked her why she had changed her spelling of the word *play*. She told me she found it in her picture dictionary. I wondered if she had copied the spelling from Joey, who also used the word in his writing, or if he shared the spelling with her because they sit at the

same table. Either way I was glad that Allie had changed the way she spelled *play*. I had made a note earlier to give her some additional instruction at another time about when *y* walks at the end of the word playing the “silent *e* game.” I decided to keep my notes to work with her even though she now had the correct spelling. I also noticed in her writing she wrote the word *like* but it was missing its silent *e*. I was very proud of her attempt at a complete sentence. Allie also heard all of the sounds in her words, but she wrote a few letters backwards.

I sat there for a moment to observe the children and began to enjoy the sight of them looking through their picture dictionaries and pulling their hands apart pretending to stretch a rubber band to sound out a word. Most of the children were writing at their tables, and there were few disturbances in the room.

### Julie's Writing



Soccer Home

I like to play

dog deer

mouse

Julie liked that the directions were to write anything about Fall. She didn't want to write a sentence but as she started to list things in Fall, she attempted a sentence. I believe Julie developed her entire sentence on her own. She was able to write the initial letter for *like*, the entire word *to*, and all of the sounds of *play*. Julie copied deer and mouse out of the picture dictionary and I am not sure where she found the spelling of soccer.

### David's Writing



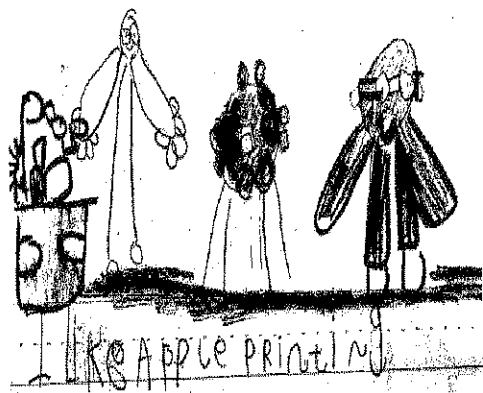
Autumn I go to the zoo
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As David began to write he sat down on the floor in front of the chalkboard and copied the word *Autumn*. He then moved back to his table and wrote everything except *zoo*, which he copied out of the picture dictionary. David was very proud of his writing and so was I, and he also wrote all of his words nicely. He capitalized the beginning of every word but forgot when *I* stands alone he must be proud and be a capital.

### Second Directed Writing Experience

Approximately one week later I decided to have the children do another directed writing activity. I wanted them to become comfortable writing about the things we were doing in school. The day before we had an apple festival in our classroom. Several of the children's parents came in for the afternoon while the children worked on a variety of apple activities. Before I asked the children to write, we talked about some of the activities during the apple festival. They had an apple taste test, made applesauce, and cut apples into spirals.

During writing activities the children are allowed to work anywhere in the room. They could stay at their normal table, move to a friend's table, work at any extra tables, or even on the floor. I encouraged them to talk about what they are writing and guide each other through the process. If the conversation strayed to another topic, however, I asked them to find a new location. I wanted the children to realize they are not on their own when it came to working. Their classmates are their best resource for help with directions, guidelines, and spellings. Again, I handed the children a half sheet of story paper and asked them to either write or draw first to express what they liked most about the apple festival. I also wrote *apple festival* on the chalkboard to give them a reference to use to spell those words.

Mitch's Writing

I like apple printing

When I turned around from the chalkboard, Mitch was already calling me over to his table. I sat down at the empty seat next to him and moved a little bit closer to see his paper clearly without moving it out of his view.

Mitch said, "I need some help. I am trying to do *like*."

On his paper he had an *l* written. I started to stretch the word out for him and he wrote *lik*. "Mitch, who needs to walk with *i* to make it say its name?" Mitch wrote an *e* on his paper but in between the *i* and *k*. So his word now read *liek*.

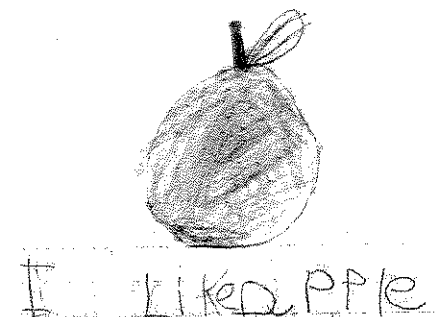
I asked, "Do *i* and *e* usually walk next to each other in a word? Or does a consonant usually come in the middle of them?" Then Mitch erased everything and wrote, *le*.

"Say *like* again, and then say what you have written," I told Mitch. He erased again and wrote *liek*. Mitch looked at his paper, erased again, and wrote *leik*.

I pointed to his paper where the word was written and said, “*e* the way it is written here will say *ee* but *i* needs to be saying its name. You had it right when you had *i* as the second letter. Can you write it like that again?” Mitch erased again and wrote, *lik*. Then I asked him, “Have you ever seen *e* at the end of a word?” Mitch nodded his head up and down, displaying understanding and then wrote *e* at the end of the word for *like*. “Does that look like a word you may have seen before? Could this word say *like*?” I asked him. Mitch just smiled.

My initial instruction to Mitch confused him. Mitch was only in our school program a few months last year, and he did not have the advantage of the same phonemic awareness activities as the other students. When I asked him who has to walk at the end of the word, I was asking him something in which he had limited instruction. I need to remember to choose terminology appropriately for each student based on his or her varied backgrounds and prior educational experiences. Mitch copied *apple* from the board and I believe Mrs. Finkel gave him the spelling of *painting*. He completed his writing with only minor capitalization errors.

### Julie's Writing



I like apple

Julie, sitting at the kidney table in the back of the room with several other students, was waving her hand. I knelt down in between Julie and Allie. Julie said, "I need help stretching out *like*." Kathleen stood up, pointed to a writing project displayed on the wall and said, "It's up there on the chalkboard."

"Which one?" asked Julie.

"Where?" asked Allie.

Kathleen pointed harder and said, "Up there, on Nick's, next to David's."

Allie with more excitement in her voice said, "I see it. I see it!"

Allie, now leaning on the table towards Julie, "Do you see it? It is right up there! Do you see it Julie? It's right there!"

Julie looked up, "I saw it already."

I enjoyed that Allie and Kathleen had found a reference in the classroom for the spelling of *like*. I hoped that more children would realize there were spellings of words they need all around the room. I also liked that Allie and Kathleen were helping a friend. I wanted the children to see they can learn from each other as well as from me.

Later Julie came to show me her paper indicating she was done. Her paper read, *I li apple*. I said, "Julie, please look at *like* again on your paper and remember where you found the word. Have you missed some of the letters?"

Julie walked back to the kidney table and a minute later returned with her corrections. On her completed writing she had copied *like* from the reference on

the wall and she had copied *apple* from the chalkboard, but *I* was written independently.

Tony approached me while I was still at the kidney table and explained, “I need help spelling *like*.”

I turned toward the table and said, “I have another friend here who needs help spelling *like*. Can anybody help him?”

Julie jumped up, “Can I tell him?” She started pointing to the projects on the wall.

Allie also pointed and said, “See it up there? It’s on the tippy, tippy, top. Just don’t include the *I* before it.” Tony looked up at the wall and then walked away. I left the kidney table and walked over to where Tony had started to work and I sat down with him to help him “stretch out” the word *projects*.

### Julie’s Extra Writing

guinea pig  
 dog rat  
 snake frog  
 dolphin blue jay  
 hummingbird  
 owl bill

guinea pig
dog rat
snake frog
dolphin blue jay
hummingbird
owl bill

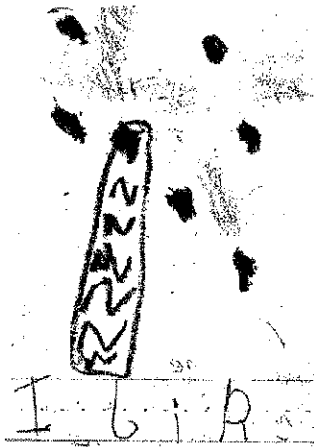


After Julie finished her writing, she asked if she could have some time to herself to write whatever she wanted. I told her she had five minutes until we needed to clean up. I was so excited that Julie wanted to do additional writing. She seemed to be getting more confident. She retrieved a piece of paper and settled herself back at the kidney table with her picture dictionary. Five minutes later Julie stood in front of me with a big smile on her face and said, "I love writing!" Julie's eagerness to expound on her new writing skills pleased me. We discussed her thoughts about writing, and I shared her thoughts in a Patai poem below. I created the poem by removing the questions I asked Julie and just presented her answers. I wanted to show the power of her words standing alone.

### **Julie's Self Reflection**

I love writing!  
 Last week I told Miss Alvarez I only like to write color words.  
 Color words are easy.  
 When I see the words, I want to write them.  
 Then I like to write.  
 So I like to write when I can see the words.

### **David's Writing**



I like

It was time to clean up, and I asked all of the children to bring their writing to me. When David and Kevin brought me their work, they both had very little written. Kevin had copied a few words from a brainstorm list in the corner of the classroom, and David had started to write *I like*. David and Kevin had wasted time moving throughout the room trying out different locations to write. At one point they were both lining up pencils to prepare themselves to write. Several times they were instructed to get back to work, not because they were talking, but because they were just looking around. I know both Kevin and David had struggled while writing, however both refused assistance. I knew that during our next writing exercise I would make sure to monitor them more frequently to assure they were keeping on task.

### **High Frequency Words**

It was now the first full week of October, and the children had completed two directed writing activities. I was surprised to see that many students were still having some difficulty with words they read and saw everyday. Normally, high frequency words (*like, and*) are mastered in kindergarten and reinforced in grade one. I should not have been surprised since earlier in September many of my students had needed a strong review of the letters of the alphabet and the sounds those letters make and could not spell their color words. I decided to review the high frequency words more thoroughly than I had originally planned.

Traditionally, these words would be added to our word wall as words the children already know. As we reviewed each word, we added it to the word wall, so that the children would have a reference to insure they were spelled correctly. My intention was to help the children reduce focusing on how to spell their high frequency words so that they could concentrate more on other words.

### **Dialogue Journals**

Since the beginning of the school year, the children had free time to write in their daily journals and minimal directed writing experiences. I felt the children were now ready to start writing in their dialogue journals. I explained that I would be asking each of them to write a letter weekly in their journals to a willing adult about what they had learned that week in school. The willing adult could be a family member, guardian, teacher, or another agreed-upon adult in the student's life. I hoped by giving them the real purpose of writing to someone about school, would increase enthusiasm about writing. As Vygotsky (1978) explains, “. . . Writing should be meaningful for children, . . . intrinsic need should be aroused in them, and . . . writing should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for life” (p. 118).

The journals would serve as a place for the children to write to a real audience, an adult in their life. The importance of providing a real audience and purpose for students' writing was clear in what Wollman-Bonilla (2000) observed

in two first grade classrooms. She said, “These journals are a manageable way for teachers to involve families . . . in children’s school learning and literacy development, and they are an effective way to provide real purposes and audiences for children’s early writing” (p. 3). I hoped that having this written communication with the adults in their lives would present a positive experience to share classroom activities and instruction. As Dewey (1938) reminds us, “Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had” (p. 27). Hopefully, writing in the dialogue journal would create excitement for the children about writing and prove to be a positive, “educative experience” in writing that could be expanded later. Students would subsequently read the most recent journal entry, the response from the cooperating adult, and initiate a new response to the correspondent. I would review all the students’ entries and conference as needed, making notes for possible mini-lessons for the whole class or individuals. The dialogue journal would present an opportunity for authentic writing as well as provide a comprehensive record of each child’s progress in reading and writing.

As a prelude to begin the dialogue journals I read a book to the children that is portrayed through letter correspondence. I started by asking the children to sit on the floor at the meeting area in front of my big blue chair, where I sat down. Before I began to read, *The Gardener* written by Sarah Stewart and illustrated by David Small, I told students while I was reading, I wanted them to think about

why I had chosen this book to read today. I asked them to think about any connection to our school day. In *The Gardener*, the main character, a little girl named Lydia Grace Finch, was sent to live with her uncle due to her family having financial hardship. She wrote letters home to her parents about her life.

After I read the first letter, Tony raised his hand and asked if I was reading the book because of the letter.

“Lydia Grace just wrote a letter just like we are going to do in our journals,” added Tony.

He was right, but I did not want to acknowledge his answer because I wanted to see if anyone else would think of a connection. I asked him to allow me to finish reading the book and then we would see if he was right. When I finished I asked, “What did Lydia Grace use her letter for?”

Linda answered, “To tell her family what was happening while she was living with her uncle.”

“When you get home each day, how many of your parents ask what you did in school or how your day was?” I asked trying to find a transition. I wanted to give them sufficient time to write their first entry. Several of the students raised their hands and David yelled out, “I forget all the time.”

Julie said, “My Mom asks me every day, ‘How was your day?’ and I always say, ‘lots and lots of work.’”

David said, “Sometimes it is all the same thing that we do.”

Mitch said, "Well the same thing, but different."

Then I asked, "What would you use a letter for?"

David answered, "To tell people stuff."

Julie said, "To tell people stuff so you don't have to jump in a plane to tell them something."

Then I asked, "Does it always have to be to someone who is far away? Can it be someone in your house? I would like you to think about your parents asking you about school and think about writing letters. Can we combine those two?"

Connor said, "We can write letters because they [our parents] want to know what is going on."

David said, "Because they want to know what we know and they don't know."

Then Linda raised her hand and said, "Our parents want to know what we are thinking and what we are doing in school."

"What have we been learning in school? What could we write about," I asked.

Mitch said, "Letters."

Linda said, "Colors."

Julie said, "Number words."

Linda said, "Writing about Fall."

Earlier in the day I labeled each child's journal, which the children affectionately refer to as Family Journals. I included a letter inside the book to the parents to guide them on using the journals to maximize the success of each child [included as Appendix D].

I instructed the children to open the journals to the first page. Just like in the story *The Gardener*, we started our letter with the date in the top right corner of the paper. As the children wrote their greeting I reminded them of their chosen participant (Mom or Dad). "Now I want you to write to your Mom or Dad about school. You can tell them about Fall, the apple festival, colors or your favorite part of school," I told them.

As they started, Casey walked up to me, and said with a small smile, "You just got to give it a try."

I smiled back at Casey and said, "You're right, all we have to do is try our best." I was so happy to hear Casey saying he was going to try.

Shortly after our conversation I sat down with Casey, and he showed me how he tried to write *Jaws*. Casey's favorite movie is *Jaws*, and he talks and writes about it all the time. All the pages in his daily journal have been about the movie. Each day he wrote he repeatedly asked Mrs. Finkel or me how to spell it, so one day I decided to write to Casey in his journal. I used this practice occasionally to help students discover spellings for themselves. The day I wrote

to Casey, I wrote about his interest in the movie, *Jaws*, and how I hoped he would eventually enjoy other movies too.

I turned to Casey and asked him, “Where do you have the correct spelling of *Jaws* that you could use as a reference?”

No response came from Casey.

Tony yells, “I know!” Casey looked at Tony as he said, “Your daily journal!”

“Oh,” said Casey and he retrieved his daily journal. I then turned to help Tony and was interrupted by Andrew wanting to know how to spell *cold*, and Jack wanted to know how to spell *like*. I asked them to let me help Tony and then I would help them. Tony needed help in forming a question mark. He did not understand what one looked like or its correct placement in a sentence. As I guided him, Beth asked for the spelling of *like*, and Tony quickly pointed to his book to show her.

After I finished helping Tony and the others who were waiting, I reviewed the entries in each dialogue journal. I began to sense that many of the children were struggling, and some appeared frustrated. Some students labored to express their thoughts or to choose a topic. Others decided what to write in their journals, but once the words were on the page, many were incoherent.

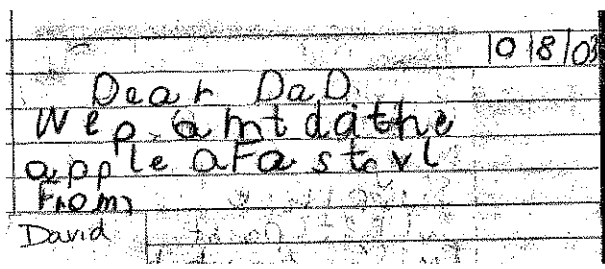
It was getting close to the time for them to go to physical educational, and I was uncomfortable with the progress of the journals. I did not feel the children



were confident with their writing. I had hoped the children could take their journals home today, but the well-being and security of the children was more important to me. I felt we needed more time to talk about things and provide more guidance tomorrow as a class. I reminded them of how very proud I was for how hard they worked on something that was very difficult. They put their journals on the edge of my desk, and we prepared to go to physical education.

I hoped that the next day would be better. But would it be? Did I really believe that, or was it merely wishful thinking? I knew that I needed to do what was educationally sound for the children, while keeping them in a safe and secure learning environment, so the next day, I decided to provide more individualized instruction to help the children complete the journal entries. The class worked to finish unrelated projects with Mrs. Finkel assisting as needed, while I conferenced one-on-one with children on their writing.

### David's Writing

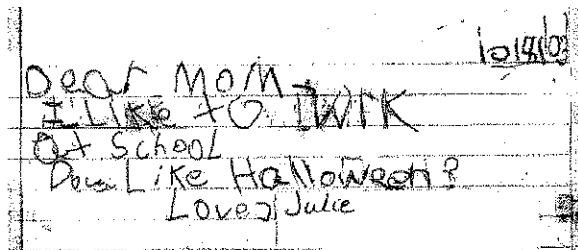
 <p>10/8/03 Dear Dad We painted at the apple festival From David</p>	<p>10/8/03 Dear Dad We painted at the apple festival From, David</p>
---	--

David and I worked one-on-one so that I could help him with his entry. While I was working with David I noticed he was continuing to have difficulties

encoding words to spell them. David needed the letter *e* for the word *we*, but he told me he forgot how to make the letter. He looked up at the alphabet on the wall for a guide. While he was doing that I got him his letter guide, a desk tablet that I have for each student with the alphabet, number line, color and shapes. I wanted him to have a reference that was closer to him than using the wall. David and I continued to work letter by letter and for almost every sound David had to go through the alphabet until he found the letter that matched. We continued to work word by word except for *apple*, which he copied from the chalkboard. He appeared to be very tired by the time he finished writing, but as he read over his letter, he was proud of his writing.

Working individual with the children proved to be a very slow and somewhat unproductive process, however. After forty minutes of instruction I had only helped three children finish their dialogue journals. After lunch, I decided to sit with the children in groups of three to help them finish their entries. This appeared to be more productive approach but was still not my intentions of how to implement the journals.

### Julie's Writing



10/8/03  
 Dear Mom  
 I like to work  
 at school  
 Do you like Halloween?  
 Love, Julie

While I was working in small groups, Julie worked with me. She wanted the spelling of *school*. I showed Julie a reference on the wall of the classroom for the spelling. While we worked Julie remembered the spelling of *like* and tried her best to spell *work*. *Work* is a difficult word to spell because of the *r control*. I am proud of her for getting as many letters correct as she did. I made a note to review with the class the sounds of *r control* and how our mouths are shaped for each type. Once Julie and I finished working together, she helped to guide several other students find the same reference for the spelling of *school* as they worked with me.

I wanted the children to be able to write independently and only guide them when needed. But they were struggling too much to write independently. I needed to remind myself that the children were only beginning first graders and having trouble choosing their words regardless of the spelling. When I had introduced this during my pilot study a year earlier, it had been January and the children were older. Additionally, this class was developmentally younger which made a more intense experience for them. Finally, a day later I had helped more of the children and was able to send several of the journals home.

I worried that the parents were expecting to see the first journal entry and were becoming anxious to respond to their child. I contemplated options to ease the process for the students who continued to have difficulty. I decided to provide a few sentence starters to help guide their writing. Although I had not intended to

include starters, I needed to alter my instruction to assist those students having difficulty. I hoped that they would help to provide more confidence to initiate their writing. After some time I could choose to gradually reduce the frequency of providing sentence starters. On the third day of the first journal entry, again I sat with small groups to offer assistance. At this point I provided sentence starters for several of the children and finally, by the end the third day, the remaining journals went home.

### **Back-To-School Night**

It was now the second week of October and a few days after the dialogue journals had gone home. It was also “Back-to-School Night,” and I would use this time as an opportunity to tell the parents more about why the children were using the dialogue journals and how they might maximize the experience for their child. As evident in Lopez’s research (1990) it is important that parents understand the rationale of the research. I was hesitant, though, because the initial journal writing activity had not been the positive experience I had hoped it would be. I wanted to convey the benefit of dialogue journal writing to the parents, but I did not want my own insecurities to be evident in my explanation to the parents. I knew I had to present the information positively because I was confident that it would become a successful experience.

That evening I provided the parents an overview of my classroom routines and the events of a typical day in our classroom. I then discussed, in detail, the concept and structure of the dialogue journals. I wanted the parents, as responding participants, to appreciate the research study and understand how beneficial their cooperation could be for their child. I wanted them to view the journals as a tool to facilitate their own child's learning and growth. While discussing the journals, a few questions arose which needed clarification.

Andrew's Mom:

So you don't want us to correct them? What do we do when they ask if they got all of the words right?

Miss Alvarez:

That is a good question. We want to make sure the children remain confident about what they are writing. Reassure them that they gave it a very good try and you are proud of what they wrote. We want to build independent learners who can break apart the words on their own. We want them to evolve into self-monitoring students who comprehend when something makes sense and when something does not.

Connor's Mom:

What exactly do you mean by conference? What will that entail?

Miss Alvarez:

Thank you for asking that question. During the conference the child and I will read and talk about their writing. If I noticed a word the child has spelled incorrectly in the journal, but Dad used it in his entry, we will talk about the way the word looks and how it should be spelled. I may also remind the child that if you have a short vowel and *k* sound follows it you must write *ck*; if it is a long vowel you only write *k*. While I am conferencing with a child I may decide the whole class needs a review of a particular area. The other day we were all having trouble with the word *like*, so I designed a lesson to meet the needs of the whole class. However, I may determine a particular child needs help with a concept individually,

and that is what we will do during our conference. It can also be viewed as individualized instruction.

Back-To-School Night ended, and I thanked the parents for coming.

Several stayed for more conversation, including Chris' Dad who wanted to talk to me about the journals. Based on our conversation, which I documented in my filed log, I developed a vignette to share his perspective of the project.

### "I Commend You"

I want to commend you, Miss Alvarez, for all you are trying to do with these journals. I really just wanted to tell you how amazing these dialogue journals are, and they seem to be very little work.

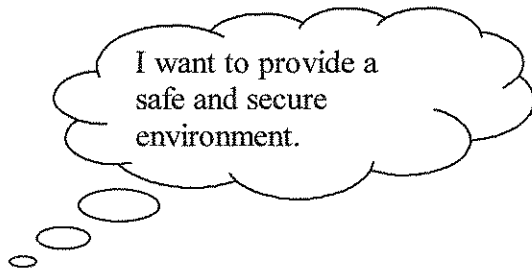
As soon as I heard about the journals I spoke with a family member who was a teacher. She had never heard of anything like these journals. I had not either. She thought it was an absolutely wonderful idea and so do I! It not only gives the children a real purpose for writing, but it also makes the parents pay attention to the child's education. It gives the parents a guide to see how the child is progressing and identify areas of difficulty.

I think this should be done in every grade level! I definitely think you should push to have every grade level in this district use journal and when you are done with your thesis you should consider presenting this idea around the country. You are basically just taking your writing instruction into a different form and giving the children individualized instruction. What a wonderful way to have the parents and the teacher working together to teach and guide the child!

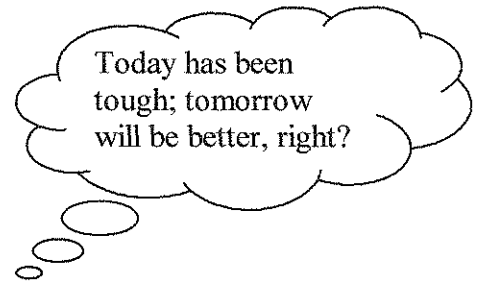
I was elated by Chris' father's comments, but I was still unsettled. My colleagues also felt it necessary to give me advice. How should I proceed? How would the journals become an integral part of a positive, safe, and secure learning

environment? In the pastiche that follows I juxtapose my thoughts with the responses of parents and colleagues.

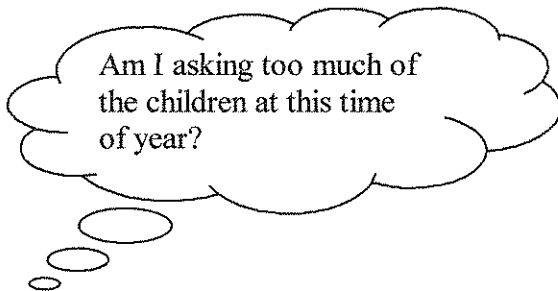
**“What do I do? Who do I listen to?”**



An absolutely wonderful idea.  
-Chris' Dad



Your expectations are excessively high.  
-Colleague



I think this should be done in every grade level.  
-Chris' Dad

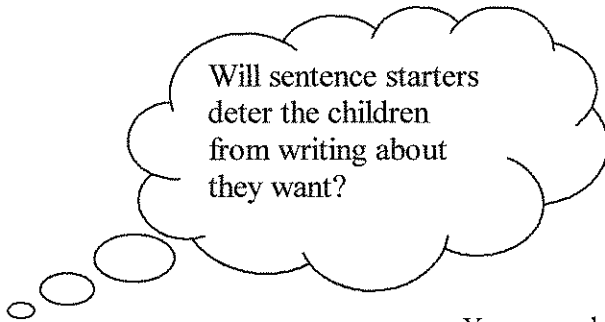
I do not like the idea [dialogue journals] as much anymore.  
-Mrs. Finkel

It not only gives the children a real purpose for writing but it also makes the parents pay attention to their child's education. It gives the parents a guide to see the child's progress.

-Chris' Dad

Think about giving sentence starters.

-Colleague

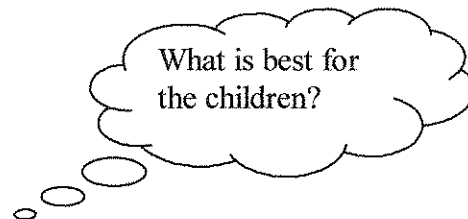


You are asking too much of the children.

-Mrs. Finkel

What a wonderful way to have the parents and the teacher working together to teach and guide the child.

-Chris' Dad



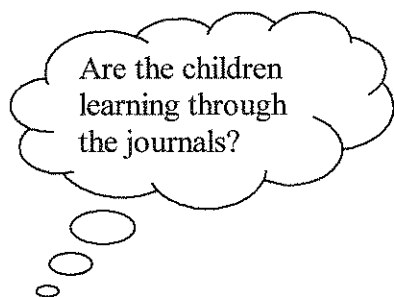
Maybe you could give two main topics to write about.

-Colleague

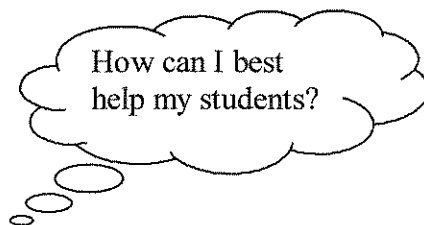
What a wonderful way to have the parents and the teacher working together to teach and guide the child.

-Chris' Dad





I really just wanted to tell you how amazing these dialogue journals are and they seem to be very little work. You are basically just taking your writing instruction into a different form.  
-Chris' Dad



### **Second Journal Entry**

After reflecting upon the comments of my colleagues, the parents from Back-To-School Night and my own insecurities and frustrations, I felt the children would respond well to writing in our dialogue journals the next day in school. I had stressed and worried about the children when they wrote their first entry, but was I overreacting? I needed to relax and give the children another chance to write an entry. I intended to again provide sentence starters and a few topics for the journals entries to help the students begin writing. We reviewed the previous week's lessons, and I hoped they would offer topics I could use to

provide starters to assist with their writing. I asked, “What have you learned this week?”

Joey:

I learned how to spell *recess*.

Linda:

I learned how to spell *school*.

I didn't know there was an *h* in it and now I know.

Beth:

I learned how to tell [spell] words.

Kathleen:

I learned how to spell *home*.

Mrs. Finkel helped me slide the word.

Stretch the word.

Mitch:

I learned about our journals.

I learned to write the day of the week with my letters at home.

I enjoyed writing in the journal.

I did not want to wait another week to write again, so I wrote again at home with mom.

Their answers surprised me! I expected them to tell me about the topics we had been learning about like Fall, bats, and colors. Instead they told me mostly what they had learned to spell. We retrieved our journals, and I asked them to read over their Mom's and Dad's most recent response. I wanted them to look at the words their parents had used. After a minute or so, I guided them to write the date and their greeting. I was ready to show them how to use what we

learned. As I started to write some sentence starters on the board, I was surprised because several students had already begun to write on their own.

For those students who continued to struggle, I provided the sentence starters on the easel for guidance. I quickly wrote sentence starters from the children's previous entries that had been spelled incorrectly. I thought this would be a good start, and I would add additional sentence starters and words to the list as needed. Our list included:

Thank you for writing back to me

My favorite part of school is

I like to

Casey asked me to add *I missed you* so he could write to his mom who was away on a business trip.

I then asked them to start writing and to try their best to write on their own. I reminded them to use their picture dictionaries, their parents' entries, words around the room to help them spell, or they could ask a friend for help with stretching a word. I looked around; the children were writing.

I moved throughout the room helping those who needed assistance. At times, there was a long line at Mrs. Finkel's table for help with spellings. I reminded the students to try on their own and come to Mrs. Finkel or me only if they were really struggling. As each child finished the entry, he or she read it to me. As needed, I guided them through different areas.

David's Writing

Dear Dad: 10/16/03  
 Thank you for  
 writing back to me  
 My favorite part of  
 school is PE.  
 I like to paint  
 I miss you because  
 you were away  
 Love, David

Dear Dad 10/16/03  
 Thank you for  
 writing back to me  
 My favorite part of  
 school is PE.  
 I like to paint.  
 I missed you because  
 you were away.  
 Love, David

David sat down on the floor in front of the easel and wrote in his journal. When he was done, he approached me to read his entry. I looked at his journal as he prepared to read and noticed he had only written the sentence starters. He had not added anything to them. David just stood there and looked at his book. I told him I was proud of his writing, but we needed to look back over everything to finish each of the sentences he had started. David and I sat together and I stretched out each word he wanted to write except for the words *paint* and *were*. I asked David if he could find *paint* written in his Dad's letter. He copied *paint* from his Dad's letter and I gave him the spelling of *were*. Again, while David and I worked on words together, he repeatedly needed to go through the entire alphabet before he realized what letter made the sound he needed. I was observing more and more that David's silliness was covering his struggles and that he would require more guidance than the others when he wrote to assure success in his writing.

Allie's Writing

10/16/03  
 Dear Mom  
 I like to  
 wrk  
 Doo you like  
 to wrk?  
 LOVE, Allie

10/16/03  
 Dear Mom  
 I like to  
 work  
 Doo you like  
 to work?  
 LOVE, Allie

10/16/03  
 Dear Mom,  
 I like to  
 work.  
 Do you like  
 to work?  
 Love, Allie

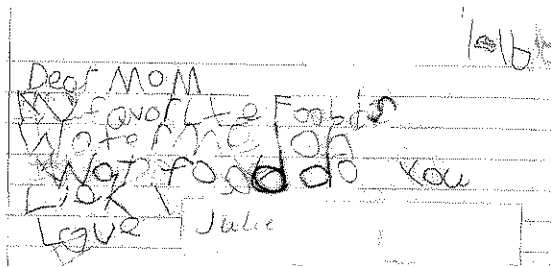
her letter to her mom when she was done writing. In her entry Allie used the word *work* and spelled it *wrc*. I remembered that Allie's Mom had used the word *work* in her response to Allie's first entry. I guided Allie to look back and correct her spelling of *work*. It was good to see that while Allie understood words needed to be separated, she was improving her layout of words in sentences. I feel the model of her mother's letters could have helped her to see how words and sentences should be kept together. Allie did a great job writing. I especially enjoyed that she added a heart to the spelling of *love*.

Before the children wrote I suggested they could ask a question of their parents about what they were writing. I only expected a few to be successful writing a question. While they were writing, Linda asked if she could write more than one question. I told her she could write as many as she wanted. I was not surprised with her request. When she was done she approached me to read her entry. I noticed she only had a few spelling mistakes. I was so proud of her

writing so much that I did not feel it was necessary to correct minor mistakes. I guided her to review her Dad's letter to see the way the letter flowed. I reminded her to write in a left to right progression, because she tends to write all over the page.

Several days later Linda gave me a writing sample she developed independently, clearly showing she understands and had mastered left to right progression and questioning.

### Julie's Writing



Dear Mom,

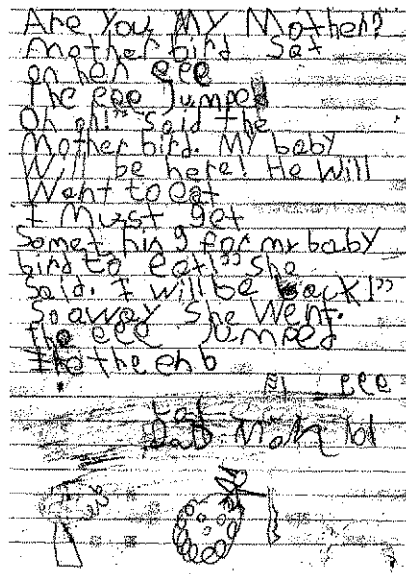
My favorite food is  
watermelon  
What food do you  
like  
Love, Julie

Julie completed this entry by copying from the picture dictionary and other references in the classroom. She had some letters written backward, and unfortunately she spelled *like* incorrectly but had all of the letters. I should have guided her to look back at her previous entry. I noticed she also used a heart for the *o* in *love* like Allie. I am unsure where they both saw that reference. Each time Julie completed a piece of writing, she would share it with me, and we would talk about her feelings. We discussed her thoughts about writing, and I shared her

thoughts in a Patai poem below. I created the poem by removing the questions I asked Julie and just presented her answers.

**“Happy”**

Happy!  
I like to write.  
Sometimes I even write a whole book with 50 pages in it.  
Like Are You My Mother? (A Dr. Suess book).  
I have liked to write for a long time!  
My Mom says I am writing much better.  
She says I am starting to write like her.



Are You My Mother?  
Mother bird sat  
on her egg  
The egg jumped  
Oh no! said the  
Mother bird. My baby  
will be here! He will  
want to eat  
"I must get  
something for my baby  
bird to eat!" She  
said. "I will be back!"  
So away she went.  
The egg jumped  
The the end

Dad Mom

egg

Julie brought in a journal she had written in at home on her own and she wanted me to look at it. She had copied part of *Are You My Mother?* by Dr. Suess. I was proud of her that she understood that writing is a process of words on paper, even though a lot of it had been copied. Julie had been writing much more, but, even when copying she still wrote some of her letters backwards and

omitted some quotation marks. I was extremely happy to see Julie writing so much and her increased confidence. I hoped to see her continue to grow. Twice throughout the day I saw Julie take out the journal she brought from home and read over what she had written. I told her I was so proud of her and all the writing she was doing.

### **November Already?**

November can be one of the shortest “teaching” months in a school year. By the time the middle of the month arrived, I had only been in my classroom for five full days. I knew there would be no improvement in the teaching schedule throughout the remainder of the month.

November was also conference time when I met with each parent to discuss their child’s progress and solicited opinions about the dialogue journals. Many parents expressed how much they appreciated the journals. They enjoyed hearing stories they might not have heard if the child had not written about these topics in the journals. They liked hearing about what we learned, not just in the journal, but also through the additional verbal communication the journal initiated.

Allie’s mom was excited to see her daughter writing so early in first grade. When I had taught her other daughter a few years ago, we did not write this early in the school year.



Andrew's Mom said that she looked forward to the journal coming home. She enjoyed seeing each topic chosen by her son and was excited about the conversations the journals introduced at home.

David's Dad stated he enjoyed the opportunity to participate in the journal interaction and the responses for communication. He commented the journals revealed to him that David was having difficulty encoding words. David's family agreed to make a concerted effort to work with him on the alphabet and the sounds each letter makes.


Julie's Mom said she had concerns about Julie in the beginning of the year and was amazed that now she could not get Julie to take a break from writing. She said Julie has many different journals at home and frequently asks to have a new journal purchased for her. Julie had told her Mom that if Miss Alvarez loves journals, then she must love journals, too.

I was excited the parents were finding the journals to be a positive experience. The children and I had been working on mini-lessons about responding to their parents' letter. I wanted them to see the value of continued communication through responsive writing. This dialogue was sometimes hindered by the children repeatedly not returning their journals in a timely manner. A few times the children wrote on a separate piece of paper and added to their journal at a later date. Linda and her Dad were doing a commendable job corresponding. Her Dad was asking questions and writing in a way that

facilitated an easy response from Linda. However, not all parents were responding as effectively. That was fine because I was happy for their responses in all attempts. At this point I found that some of the parents' responses were not the models I had expected to generate. Parents were using incorrect spelling and non-standard English. When this happened to a child, I did my best to provide him or her with a more appropriate model to use as a guide. From my observations of the entries, most parents took their time and wrote a meaningful response to continue the dialogue with their child. However, a few parents wrote very limited responses that offered little guidance to the child.

### Cassie Corresponding With Mom

10/24/03  
 Dear MOM,  
 MOM IN SCHOOL  
 I learned  
 STOP, DROP AND  
 ROLL  
 WHAT IS A FIRE  
 RULE YOU KNOW?  
 LOVE, Cassie



Dear Cassie,

I'm glad your learning about fire safety rules. If there ever is a fire you'll know exactly what to do. One fire safety rule I know is never play with matches!  
 Love, Mom

10/24/03  
 Dear Mom,  
 Mom in school  
 I learned  
 stop, drop and  
 roll.  
 What is a fire  
 rule you know?  
 Love, Cassie

Dear Cassie,

I'm glad you're learning about fire safety rules. If there ever is a fire you'll know exactly what to do. One fire safety rule I know is never play with matches!  
 Love, Mom

Cassie and her mother documented how easily parents can teach and guide their child through the dialogue journals. Cassie's Mom added an illustration

each week, which added an unexpected dimension to the parent response. For Cassie's writing she attempted all of the spelling, wrote a complete sentence, and copied her question from the chalkboard.

**Linda Corresponding With Dad**

10/16/03

Dear Dad

Thank you for writing back to me.

I can't wait until you write back to me again.

My favorite part of school is art.

My favorite food is pizza.

What is your favorite food to eat?	What was your favorite part of school?
Love Linda	and

10/16/03

Dear Dad

Thank you for writing back to me. I can't wait until you write back to me again. My favorite part of school is art. My favorite food is pizza.

What is your favorite food to eat?	What was your favorite part of school?
Love Linda	and

10/16/03

Dear Linda

Thanks for writing back to me so quickly. I know this will be very enjoyable for both of us.

My favorite food is pizza too. I think it is really neat that we both like pizza.

My favorite part of school was Friday afternoon. I loved that I would have Saturday and Sunday to play basketball. Only kidding. My favorite subjects were Math and History. I am very creative however art was tough for me. I love all your paintings, they're great!!

I'm so proud of you. Keep up the good work. Please write soon.

Love, Dad

P.S. Say Hi to Miss Alvarez

12/1/03

Dear Linda,

Thank you for writing back to me so quickly. I know this will be very enjoyable for both of us.

My favorite food is pizza too. I think it is really neat that we both like pizza.

My favorite part of school was Friday afternoon. I loved that I would have Saturday and Sunday to play basketball. Only kidding. My favorite subjects were Math and History. I am very creative however art was tough for me. I love all your paintings. They're Great!

I'm so proud of you. Keep up the good work. Please write soon.

Love, Dad

P.S. Say Hi to Miss Alvarez

Linda and her Dad were model participants in this research study. Each asked questions of the other, and each answered the questions appropriately and included another question in the response. Their questions and responses were an excellent means of continued communication and a clear example of dialogue journal writing. Their correspondences demonstrate Calkins (1997) belief that “It is far better to support a child’s writing by responding to its intended message . . .” (p. 57).

For this writing Linda and I had a conference on writing in a left to right progression as stated earlier. She used previous entries as a reference for spellings while attempting her writing on her own. Linda’s success in writing is evident and clearly demonstrated in the progression of correct letter structure and in the choice of words used to communicate with her Dad. Her Dad’s responses included ample praise for Linda’s success. He was extremely supportive and encouraging, which provided additional motivation to his daughter. He took extra time and detail to include family activities in his communication.

Since our schedule had been so inconsistent in the month of November, I decided to use some of our small blocks of time to introduce story writing. We celebrated the birthday of author Marc Brown by studying his biography and learning the background for his story ideas. As the children gained confidence writing in their journals, I was encouraged they would enjoy starting to write their own stories.

### **Independence**

At the beginning of my study I conducted a group interview to determine the children's feelings about writing. At this point I decided to conduct a second interview. Again, the children and I sat on the floor in a large circle to discuss our feelings. I wanted to determine if anyone's feelings had changed or if anyone would share who had not shared previously with the group.

Most of the children gave the same answers or added to their answers by commenting about how long they have enjoyed writing. This time David admitted that he does not like to write. He was unsure why; he said that he just does not like to write. Julie continued to express her enjoyment of writing.

Julie said, "When I was five years old, I used to write Dr. Seuss books. My Kindergarten teacher made me like to write."

I was also concerned the children went to Mrs. Finkel too often for help with spelling words, and I wanted them to start thinking more independently. Mrs. Finkel and I had spoken many times of the value of teaching children to find spellings for themselves. As Calkins (1994) believes, "The important thing for now is that we and our children realize that once they know a handful of sound-symbol correspondences, they can write anything they wish" (p. 74). I wanted her to see that if you give the child a spelling of a word, you have not taught them how to encode words for themselves. There are times when it is appropriate to give children assistance when spelling a word for instance when it follows no

clear phonetic rule but, Mrs. Finkel could not understand she was enabling them and not helping them to develop phonetic skills. I understood the children's continued willingness to ask Mrs. Finkel for help because she would give them the answers. I also wanted the children to realize they have resources of their own to draw upon. After we talked about their feelings about writing, I asked them to give me ideas of how we search for spellings of words. I made notes on my clipboard of what the children brainstormed. We then wrote another entry in our dialogue journals. As they wrote in their journals I added to our list the ideas developed while writing. The brainstorming ideas for writing are presented in the following pastiche that has my added commentary in italics.

**“What do I do while I write?”**

*What do we do if we can't think of how to spell the word?*

If we don't know the answer, we will go to Mrs. Finkel because she always gives answers.

*That is exactly what I don't want!*

Ask somebody.

Go to a friend for help.

Look back at your parent's letter.

Help each other.

Can we look at another page on our journal to get the spelling of dear and Dad?

*Remember you have a reference in your dialogue journal that shows you the spelling of dear and the person you are writing to*

Oh, we can look at the pages and copy the spellings

Can you help me stretch the word out?

You know, sometimes we can write a word that we  
don't even know you know

*Stretch the word out*

We can make things better with friends

We are not always with you [a teacher] every day and the whole day

Ask Three before you ask Miss Alvarez or Mrs. Finkel

*Try it for yourself*

We feel more comfortable going to a friend than a teacher

Use teamwork to help each other

### **Searching For Help**

I was happy the children had said so much about going to each other for help when writing. In the beginning, when I first interviewed them about where they went when they needed the spelling of a word, they listed themselves as the last resource. They now listed themselves first, then friends, and finally teachers. Before they wrote their next entry, I reminded them of the many resources to help

them spell, including the room itself, their friends, picture dictionaries and their teachers. "You are not on your own," I reminded them. As they started to write, I observed them working with their friends.

### Julie's Writing

11/18  
Dear MOM,  
Vampire bats  
use their set  
of needlelike  
teeth to feed on  
animals  
Love, Julie

11/18/03

Dear Mom,  
Vampire bats  
use their set  
of needlelike  
teeth to feed on  
animals.  
Love, Julie

Julie read her most recent entry and then picked up her book and walked over to Connor, and then to Linda to try and find someone to help her spell *fruit*. She then sat down with David and Tony to find the spelling she needed in a book they were using. When Julie brought her journal to me she had difficulties reading it. She told me she had copied the entire entry from the book. As Julie copied she included a comma after each word. Calkins (1994) explains children do this to show they understand the separation between words. Julie did a nice job writing within the lines, yet she and I needed to work on the way she forms the letter *a* and on using the book for a reference rather than to copy an entire entry.



**David's Writing**

Dear Dad 11/19/03  
 Vampire Bats feed on  
 off of animals blood.  
 What do you know  
 about vampire bats?  
 Love, David

Dear Dad	11/19/03
Vampire bats feed on off of animals blood.	
What do you know about vampire bats?	
Love, David	

Tony and David had come to me asking how to spell *vampire*. I reminded them there were several books in the room where they could find the spelling they needed. Tony and David retrieved the book about types of bats and brought it over to Chris for him to point out where *vampire* was.

David had copied his entire first sentence from the book he was looking through with Tony. Then he copied the remainder of his words from Tony's letter. When David brought his journal to me, he was not able to read what he had written. However, he was excited to know that all his words were spelled correctly. I helped David to read his letter to me, and I told him that he would increase his confidence when he tried to write more words on his own.

**Thinking Checklist**

By the first week of December, the children had realized how they could learn from each other and not just from their teachers. The children were successful trying to write on their own for a while, but they continued to run to

Mrs. Finkel for help, and she was not directing the children to try for themselves. There were several times I noticed a long line at her table. I needed to develop an alternative practice to help them to help themselves.

As a first grade teacher, I want my students to become independent learners and thinkers. The students and I brainstormed a thinking checklist of what they can do when they are stuck on a word or have a problem. The children presented the following ideas:

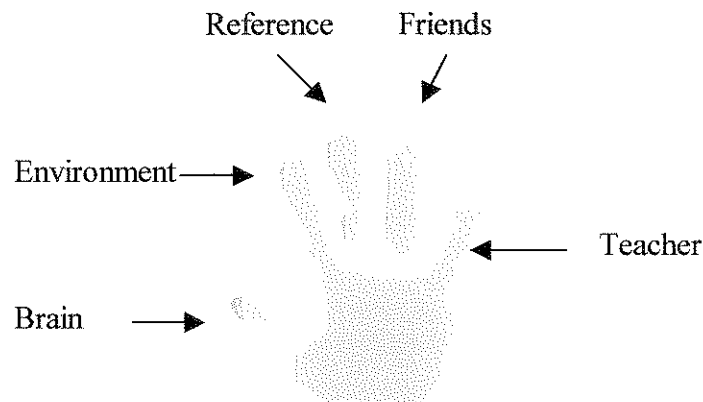
- 1 – Brain - Go to your brain, and try it yourself.
- 2 – Room - Look around where you are to see if the answer is around you.
- 3 – Picture Dictionary – Look through your picture dictionary to see if you can find the word.
- 4 – Friend – Ask friends if they know how to spell the word, where can you find the word, or if they can help you sound the word out.
- 5 – Teacher – When you have tried everything else and still need help, then go to a teacher to help with the word.

That evening, I thought about the “Thinking Checklist” and realized there were five points. I often give students a “high five” when I am really excited about something they did, if they handled something exceptionally well, or when they properly complete their work. I wanted to develop a connection for the thinking checklist to a high five. I thought about another poster used by many teachers for good listening called ‘Give Me Five.’ The poster is usually a large

hand with each finger representing a rule such as ‘eyes on speaker or lips closed.’ I could put each part of the checklist on a finger and make a “High Five” Checklist, so the next day I made a large hand poster and asked the children to join me at the meeting area. I sat in my Big Blue Chair with the hand poster and the checklist on the chalkboard. We talked about each one of the steps on the checklist.

- 1 Brain
- 2 Room / Environment
- 3 Picture Dictionary / Reference
- 4 Friends
- 5 Teacher

I pointed to the hand poster and stated that a hand has five fingers on it and our checklist has five parts. I pointed to the fingers on the poster and said each part of the checklist as follows:



I said to them, “If you go to each finger before you come to a teacher, then you are doing High Five Thinking. And when you do “High Five Thinking”, you get

a High Five.” We discussed how “High Five Thinking” would be a tool used not only in our classroom, but could also be used to help us in other areas where we learn or even at home with our family. I then went around the room and gave each child a “high five.” As I did I said, “High Five Thinking!”

### **High Five Thinking!**

The following day we had a class trip to see a play called *Goldilocks and the Holiday Bears*. Later we sat at the meeting area to discuss the play and how it could be described. We would not just say the play was good; we would give the reason why we felt the play was good or describe something that happened in the play. I asked if they wanted any words on the chalkboard and they only asked for the name of the theatre.

I reminded them to use “High Five Thinking” while they were writing in their journals about the play. I told them that coming to the teacher was called “Pinky Dancing” and they would have to prove they used all their other fingers before they danced on their pinky.

I handed each child his or her journal, and the children moved to their seats at the tables. I sat in front of the room and observed them as they read their letters, wrote the date, and began writing.

Looking around, I noticed Mrs. Finkel standing by one table where three children were working. She was helping Jack to stretch out the word *Goldilocks*.

When Mrs. Finkel moved back to her table, Joey approached her and said, "I used my brain, used the environment, and I still cannot figure out how to spell *Goldilocks*." She directed Joey back to his table to find the friend she had just worked through *Goldilocks*.

Joey walked up to Jack at his table, "Can you help me with the spelling of *Goldilocks*?" Jack slid his journal over and showed Joey where it was in his book.

### Sue's Writing

11/2/3/03  
 Dear Mom  
 I saw Goldilocks  
 And the Holiday Bears  
 at  
 Theatre  
 the best part was Goldilocks  
 woke up the bears  
 today we did star  
 at the day  
 Sue

12/3/03  
 Dear Mom,  
 I saw Goldilocks  
 and the Holiday bears  
 at  
 Theatre.  
 The best part Goldilocks  
 woke up the bears  
 Today we did star  
 of the day  
 Sue

Sue approached me and said, "I wrote the whole thing by myself with no help. I never even went off my thumb."

I gave Sue a "High Five" and said, "I am so proud of you. Now will you please read your letter to me?"

I was so excited that Sue had written all of the words on her own. She did a great job of hearing the sounds within her words. I also like she wrote about Star of the Day because it was something important to her that we did in the classroom that she wanted to share with her Mom. She had mixed capitalization in her writing. She and I will work on capitalization rules at another time because we needed to celebrate her effort of writing all on her own!

### Collaboration

### Joey's Writing

12/3/03  
 Dear Dad,  
 Today we saw  
 Goldilocks  
 and the Holiday  
 Bears and it  
 was really  
 funny.  
 Love, Joey

12/3/03  
 Dear Dad,  
 Today we saw  
 Goldilocks  
 and the Holiday  
 Bear and it  
 was really  
 funny.  
 Love, Joey

I overheard Linda and Joey talking. Linda pointed to Joey's journal and said, "Now you need to add a letter to the end of the word so that it says *real- ee*"

I looked forward to seeing Joey's writing because he had completed most of the writing on his own, but he had also received some support from his friends.

He had worked through the spelling of *Goldilocks* with Jack and the spelling of *really* with Linda. Joey did a great job with his writing and only had a few minor spelling and capitalization errors. Joey and I also reviewed his Dad's letters to see how he keeps his writing standing on a line.

The children were working collaboratively, busy practicing "High Five Thinking" and writing about the play in their journals. Mrs. Finkel also now had a way to guide children without giving them all the spellings. She could refer to the poster instead of giving the spellings. I believe the children were also beginning to understand that they are not assisting a friend if they just give them the spellings. They need to stretch the word out so they learn the words for themselves.

Casey approached me to ask a question at the same time Julie did. I asked Julie if she would please guide Casey through his writing. Julie and Casey sat down at the extra table. I could only hear portions of their conversation.

Julie said to Casey, "What is the first letter in *octopus*?" Casey wrote.

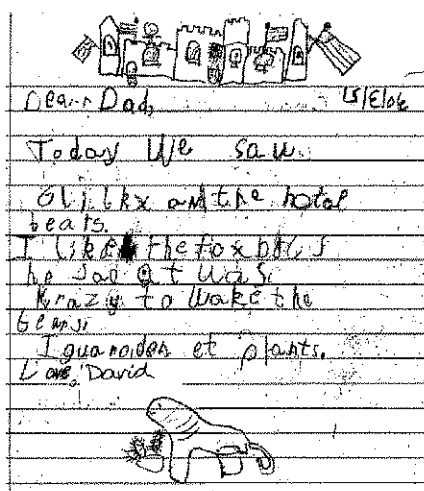
Julie then said, "Now go to the third line," and Casey wrote some more.

Julie and Casey continued to work together until his scheduled supplemental help in Basic Skills Math interrupted his work with Julie. Julie went back to her seat and sat down with her journal.

### One – On – One Guidance

Even though many of the children were working together and successfully finishing their journal entries, there were still a few children who required extra guidance. When Casey returned, he sat with me so we could work together to finish his entry.

### David's Writing



12/3/03

Dear Dad,

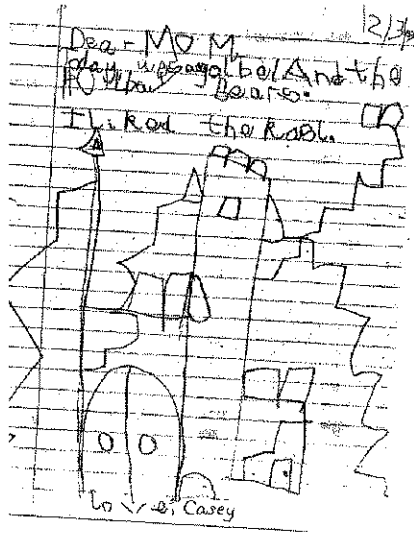
Today we saw  
Goldilocks and the Holiday  
Bears.  
I liked the fox because  
he said it was  
crazy to wake the  
bears.  
Iguanodons eat plants.  
Love, David

I also remembered David had asked me earlier if he could stop writing for a little while and make a drawing of what he was having trouble putting into words. I told him it was perfectly fine. I now asked him to stop drawing and come over by Casey and me so I could help with his writing. David and I had worked through writing what he liked about the play. Keeping with his interest in science, David also wanted to write about Iguanodons that he saw in the picture dictionary and then he finished his pictures.



This time David did not need to go to the alphabet as frequently as he had in the past. It is noticeable that his parents have been working with David at home. He had become more confident and tried more and more to attempt writing on his own.

### Casey's Writing



12/3/03  
Dear Mom,  
Today we saw Goldilocks and the  
Holiday Bears.  
I liked the castle.  
Love, Casey

Casey asked me if he could also draw a picture. I told him he could as soon as he finished writing his sentence. The freedom to be able to draw seemed to make these particular students more comfortable about what they were writing.

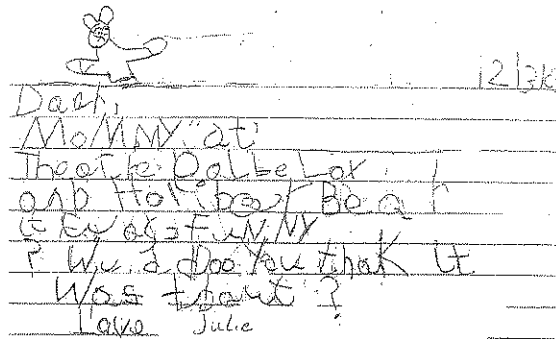
As I worked with Casey, he asked me how to spell *liked*. Even though I had taught a mini lesson practicing the spelling of *like*, some of the children were still struggling though its spelling. David and I had just worked through that word, and I asked David to guide Casey.

David said each sound, *l*, *ie*, *k*, and Casey wrote *lik*. The three of us then also worked through what goes at the end of the word when you hear *t* to make the word say *liked*.

Casey and I then worked together to stretch out the spelling of *castle*. He was very excited to have completed the letter and to be able to draw the castle since the theatre we had gone to was a castle like structure.

It was rewarding to sit and listen to David help Casey. I was encouraged to provide David the experience of being the one who guides instead of always being guided. I have to also provide a future opportunity for Casey to guide another student.

### Julie's Writing



12/3/03  
 Dear  
 Mommy at  
 Theatre, Goldilocks  
 and Holiday Bears  
 @ Lyons Family  
 I would do you thank it  
 was about?  
 Love Julie

12/3/03

Dear  
 Mommy at  
 Theatre, Goldilocks  
 and Holiday Bears  
 It was funny.  
 What do you think it  
 was about?  
 Love, Julie

While Julie was writing this entry she was also helping Casey to write part of his. I am unsure how much was accomplished on her letter before she started to help Casey. When I had asked her to help Casey, I thought she was finishing

up her letter. Once Casey left, she then went back to her own letter. For the most part Julie completed the entire letter on her own. However, Linda helped her to find a reference in the room for the spelling of *bear*.

For the first time Julie spelled *dear* incorrectly and I should have guided her to look back to her previous entries like she did for the spelling of *Mommy* from her Mom's letters. Again Julie had several of her letters backward, and she was experimenting with the placement of commas, apostrophes, and quotation marks. I was very excited that she continued to ask questions of her mother that relate to her letter.

### **Julie's Feelings**

Previously, Julie had only felt confidence writing color words. Now she was writing independently as well as guiding others. I called her over to talk to me. I collected information from this conversation and used our interactions and my observations of Julie throughout the school year to create a Vignette about what Julie might say if she wrote down her experience in a journal that I have called "Growing in Confidence."

**“Growing in Confidence”**

Dear Journal,

I never thought I would be this excited about writing. Yesterday we wrote in our family journals and I did a lot of it on my own. Linda helped me with only one word!

Now, Journal, you did not know me a few short months ago, but I used to only like to write words that I could see. If I could see the word, then I could copy it and then I liked writing. Don't get me wrong. I knew how to spell a few easy words like *dog*, *cat*, *God*, and my color words, but all other words I needed to copy. In fact, would you believe I even needed to copy the spelling of my own name because I could not remember how to spell it? Each time we wrote in school, I hoped Miss Alvarez would say we were able to use our Picture Dictionary. Without a reference, I just did not feel confident.

I quickly learned in Miss Alvarez' class there were references all around me. Kathleen and Allie were the first to show me how to find words around the room. Before I knew it, I was the one guiding others. I like helping others; it makes me feel so nice to be able to help others with words. Yesterday I was able to help Casey even though I was not even done with my work. I guided Casey through his words and then completed my own work.

So as you can see, I have really grown as a writer. I feel I am a much better writer than I was at the beginning of the school year. Not only do I have

my family journal that I use to write with my Mom, but I also have you, Journal, and many of your Journal Friends to write in. I can write whenever I want, wherever I want, and I feel better about what I am writing. I also understand that as long as I try to write, then I am a first grade writer. Well, thanks for listening, Journal, I will be back soon to write again.

Love, Julie

### Julie and David

Julie and David seemed to have both become more confident in their writing. Julie talked to me every time she wrote about her feelings and about what she wrote.

### Julie's Writing

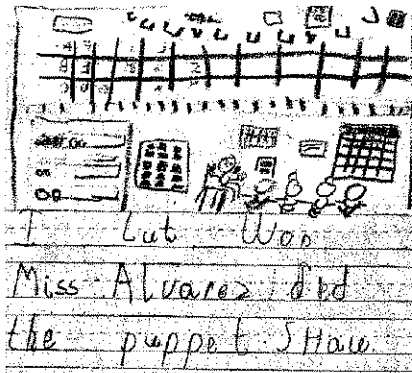
Dear Santa  
 I would like a video game  
 with a TV.  
 I am a good girl.  
 Thank you Julie

Dear Santa  
 I would like a video game  
 with a TV.  
 I am a good girl.  
 Thank you Julie

As a class project we wrote letters to Santa. A few days later Julie brought this letter in from home. She said she was going to send it to Santa, but she wanted me to read it before it was sent. I am unsure if Julie received any help at

home. I was surprised she spelled *would* correctly but she could have found a reference somewhere. Her *d*'s and *g*'s are repeatedly backward and this time she wrote her *k* as a capital and backward but she capitalized the *g* in *girl* and spelled *it* correctly. I noted that Julie now had *like* and *dear* spelled correctly.

### David's Writing



I liked when  
Miss Alvarez did  
the puppet show.

David was more reserved about his growth. He said he worked daily at home with his parents. David had become much more focused on his work, and he had controlled his disruptive behavior. He still occasionally called out, but I that usually only occurred when he was extremely excited to know the answer.

I read *Hanzel and Gretel* to the children and then performed a puppet show of the story. I asked each student to write about his or her favorite part from the book or the puppet show. When the project was done many of the children had forgotten to write their names on their papers. David was one of them. As a

class we went through all of the pictures to identify the authors. With only one remaining, David claimed it was his. I was shocked!

His handwriting was improved and nicely spaced on the lines. He also added so much detail into his picture depicting our calendar wall where I did the puppet show. He had done most of the writing on his own. He used a reference for my name, and Mrs. Finkel gave him the spelling of *puppet*. He only had a few capitalization errors. I was so impressed with David that I asked him to share it with the class. They all applauded his efforts.

### **Chanting!**

My original intention was to use our school's winter break as the end of my timeline for collecting research data; however, we would continue weekly writing in our dialogue journals as part of the first grade instructional process. The first day back from winter break Julie and Allie asked if they could write in their family journals. I told them we would, but I wanted to wait a week or so until we were settled into our routine again. My intention was to introduce a topic and have them write from that topic. A week later Julie and Allie asked again. This time David joined them. I promised the following week we would write in our journals again. That Monday I discussed how we would do something they had been asking me to do for a while. The teacher researcher embedded in me grabbed my clipboard to record their reactions.

As I picked up my clipboard, Julie cheered, “Our Journals!”

I said, “Yes, we are going to write in our journals. First, I want to quickly discuss writing and how we feel about our journals.”

David stood up and started banging his fists on the table chanting, “Family Journals! Family Journals!” The majority of the class then joined in, banging their fists and chanting, “Family Journals! Family Journals!”

I was so overwhelmed! I wanted to cry! I was so excited by their reactions. I quieted them down and asked, “Why do you want to write in your journals so badly?”

Mitch stood up with David and they both said, “Because we love to write!”

Well, that was enough for me! I put down my clipboard and retrieved their journals. Before I had time to remind them what to do, they were already reading their previous entry and writing their thoughts. All around the room they were quietly writing. My focus has always been to build a classroom where children love to read. Now some of them actually admit they now love to write, even David!

### ANALYSIS

Cole and Knowles (2000) reminds teachers, “Teaching is also a lifelong project. It represents a continuum of learning about schools and teaching, a



continuum of experience” (p. 23). Qualitative research requires an ongoing analysis of your teaching and the students’ experiences. “Reflective inquiry is an ongoing process of examining and refining practice, variously focused on the personal, pedagogical, curricular, intellectual, societal, and / or ethical contexts associated with professional work, perhaps, but not necessarily, from a critical perspective” (Cole & Knowles, p.2). While I was collecting anecdotal notes and writing entries in my field log, I was also interpreting the data as I gathered it to make the necessary adjustments to my teaching and my classroom. Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2000) agree that “as teachers, we constantly try to understand our students, their work and their world and ourselves. Interpretation is an ongoing process that begins as soon as we decide to study our own practice” (p. 186).

I recorded my reflections, concerns, and ideas regularly in analytic memos. I used them to help guide my thinking and my practice. The memos I wrote addressed my concerns about the children’s experience with the dialogue journals, frustration, whole group instructional plans like the thinking process for “High Five Thinking.” Arhar, Holly, and Kasten suggest that memos “can remind us of what we need to do next, based on what we have learned through our reflection” (p. 187).

The data were collected, compiled, and organized in my log chronologically. All notes, observations, narratives, and reflections were part of my growing data. Sagor (2000) explains, “Regardless of the particular technique

employed during the analysis phase, the researcher tries to systematically cut, shift, and sort the data into piles of like or similar objects. The key purpose of this systematic sorting and categorizing is to assist in answering the following two questions: What is the story told by my data? What might explain this story?" (p. 20). A few weeks into the study I began to organize my data with codes. I wanted to organize and categorize the data that was piling up. As Sagor (2000) suggests I grouped like ideas together with words and codes. For example, each time I wrote about a parent's positive reaction to the journals, I wrote Positive Feelings of Parents or PFOP. Toward the end of my data collection, I reviewed my codes to assemble them into bins and themes. There were bins for the codes that reflected the students, the teacher, classroom instruction, parents, and feelings. I used a graphic organizer to compile like codes and patterns within my data. I then wrote theme statements to describe the patterns and relationships that were emerging from my codes (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997).

Throughout my study I collected the students' writing and their correspondent's writing. I assessed each sample to determine which educational implementations, such as whole lessons on letter format, responding to the parent's letter or high frequency words, as well as one-on-one conferencing for spelling rules or guidance. If I felt a whole group lesson was necessary, I wrote an analytic memo and then addressed the topic. Otherwise I wrote journal notes

and attached it to the writing it pertained to and compiled it under each of their pseudonym names arranged in chronological order in a student work log.

To continue to analyze my data, I reviewed and compiled like topic, ideas, or information about the students and their parents. I used this information from my log to create the variety of narrative form I shared earlier. I also focused on individual students' growths or struggles and highlighted them in vignettes. Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) describe “. . . vignettes are compact sketches that can be used to introduce characters, foreshadow events and analyses to come, highlight particular findings, themes, or summarize a particular theme or issue in analysis and interpretation” (p. 70). To maintain trustworthiness throughout my presentation of the research, I reviewed with my participants what they said and what they experienced (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997).

## FINDINGS

When I started my research I was anxious about a variety of things. Could the children succeed in writing so early in the academic year? Could the parents accept inventive spelling and guide their child through learning? I felt if they struggled, they would dislike writing.

The following chart indicates the positive and negative impacts I conclude developed from the implementation of dialogue journals. A detailed explanation of the chart follows.

## Positive And Negative Observations In The Research Study

Positive	Negative
Individualized Instruction	Does Not Take Place of Daily Journals
Documentation Of Growth	Inconsistent Entries
Independent Searching For Words	Independent Performance Pressure
Cooperative Atmosphere	Talkative Atmosphere
Peer to Peer Coaching	Peer Pressure
Teacher Support Allowed For Variety Of Helpers	Relying Too Much On Individuals
Independent Writers Using Inventive Spelling	Incorrect Parent Models
Home -- School Connection	Parents Failed To Provide Guidance
Personal Writing	Inconsistent Correspondences

1. Dialogue journals offered the opportunity for individualized instruction but were not designed to take the place of daily journals.

Meeting the needs of every child is a consistent challenge to educators today as they work to provide superior individualized instruction to students of varied levels of ability. Vygotsky believes “Any learning a child encounters in school always has a previous history” (p. 84). The teacher must acknowledge and identify each child’s strengths and weaknesses from this previous history and guide the child accordingly. In my classroom reading is taught through small

guided reading groups. Writing is edited and revised in individual conferences during writer's workshop. Conferencing provides an opportunity for me to sit and work with each student as the other students work on their writing. I used the same conference idea from writer's workshop with the dialogue journals. The conference allowed me to focus on specific strategies to foster each child's growth. For example, Linda and I reviewed writing in a left to right progression and moved on to review how to reduce the frequency of conjunctions in her writing, how to develop appropriate sentence structure, and how to begin to use punctuation marks. David and I worked together to hear the sounds in words in order to get his ideas on paper. The journals provided a model for every child's independent writing development. I developed instruction for each child based on his or her individual needs and skills.

The time needed to provide individual attention for an in-depth review of each child's journal could place a strain on the enthusiasm of other children waiting to conference, but I do not feel that it did. The children enjoyed sharing their writing with me. The benefit of working with each child one-on-one was immeasurable. Journal notes documented each conference with a child regarding a specific topic.

Although the journals provided a medium for children to write about school or another topic of choice, I found we often neglected writing in the daily journals in our classroom instruction. Children need to write every day to

promote growth and writing development. Each journal serves a unique purpose. Dialogue journals provide an opportunity for each child to initiate and maintain communication with his or her parent. The dialogue journals predominantly provide a tool to report school events or information learned in the classroom. Daily journal writing provides an opportunity for expressive writing without judgment of the content of the statements, since the journal is fairly private. Fresch (2001) research supports that “A major purpose of journals is to help children develop as writers as they write or draw about self-selected topics” (p. 500). Some children use the daily journal as a location to create lists of words, practice rhymes, or write stories. The daily journal and the dialogue journals allow two different vehicles to experience writing instruction and one cannot take the place of another.

2. Through the dialogue journals I was able to show individualized documentation of growth; however through inconsistent entries the documentation is incomplete.

I planned to introduce dialogue journals to provide a weekly writing experience. The progression of changes in handwriting, formation of letters, hearing sounds in words, correctly spelled words, letter structure and topics chosen was clearly evident in each journal. Clay (1975) expresses the importance of the teacher to know the individual child’s progress to date. “She must keep samples of work arranged chronologically and must work hard at understanding

what the child is trying to say in his written expression” (p. 15). The dialogue journals created a stable writing place for the children. The dialogue journals provided a clearly documented history of the students’ writing development and progress.

Time limitations, however, caused scheduling problems and affected our planned weekly writing experiences. While the journals documented each child’s growth, the inconsistent entries interfere with the presentation of a clear documentation of growth for each of the students. I am working to straighten out the scheduling problems to have a more clear documentation through the end of the school year.

3. While the children were writing they independently searched for the spelling of words; however at times they struggled through the added pressure to achieve success.

The implementation of the dialogue journals provided an opportunity to expand vocabulary without using words provided in other instructional areas. Prior to this research, I waited to teach writing until later in the school year. This year I offered the children writing experiences earlier in the year through directed writing experiences. The children were independently successful during these lessons, so I introduced the dialogue journals. However, once I offered the children independent writing experience to a known audience, namely the parents, doing so seemed to induce stress. Allowing the children to have a choice of

topics was difficult in the beginning. Many children needed more direction to start their writing. I provided sentence starters and choices for topics to reduce the pressure I perceived the children to be experiencing. Many children experienced increased performance and confidence when provided with sentence starters. Additionally I continued to review all the references available for the students to use in the classroom. As the school year progressed and their confidence improved, the children increasingly chose topics without assistance; however I still offered sentence starters and topic choices as well as guided instruction for those students who continued to struggle.

4. While the children helped each other through spellings of words a cooperative but talkative classroom environment developed.

Our classroom has developed into a cooperative community, not just in writing, but in other subject areas as well. Each time a student had a question or needed assistance, there was always a friend to help. When students heard a friend ask Mrs. Finkel or me for help, or as we called it, "Pinky Dance," they would remind each other to do "High Five Thinking." The children consistently assisted each other when they encountered difficulties. Freire (1970) would appreciate the children learning from each other and not just from the teacher because he believes education should be dialogic where the children learn through conversation, not by passively receiving information. It has been my experience



that first graders are inherently kind and helpful to other children. This particular class exhibits a higher level of kindness and helpfulness than classes of previous years, and disagreements were minimal.

The cooperative atmosphere increased the level of chatter among the students in the classroom. Kohl as cited in Delpit (2002) indicates, however, that “Teacher talk and student talk are essential components that determine the quality of learning in the classroom” (p. 147). Children talked to each other throughout the school day as they guided and helped one another with a project or a problem. As a teacher, I did not discourage talking while the children were working because they helped one another to learn through their communication. I reminded the children to keep all conversation related to current instruction and at an appropriate level as to not disturb others.

5. In our cooperative environment the children developed peer-to-peer coaching techniques, but they also struggled through the pressure to assist.

Dialogue journals and “High Five Thinking” allowed the children to develop mutual trust with one another. Students were eager and enthusiastic to help and guide each other through frustrations. I hoped the children understood that I considered them to be a valuable resource for each other and helping gave them a chance to view each other as role models. They helped each other not only with writing, but also in other areas of our first grade experiences.

Peer pressure evolved, however, as some children were more eager than others to help and offer unsolicited assistance. Occasionally, a child did not want or appreciate assistance from another student. Or the children may not have wanted to help when asked to assist. I made sure the children understood they were not obligated to help or be helped by another student. Another unanticipated negative effect was on those children who were not asked for assistance, but consistently required the assistance of others. This pressure and ability to help someone else increased the insecurities of a few students such as Kevin and Casey. Throughout the process I developed opportunities for each student to be a successful helper even if through an inconsequential activity. Even if a student achieved a minimal level of success with a particular concept, I then chose that opportunity for those students to provide guidance to others.

6. Teacher support allowed for variety of helpers, which helped to alleviate relying too much on certain students.

The students consistently requested assistance from the same small group of students. There were, of course, also children who were never asked to help others. Often I intervened to create a situation where someone who was often being guided received the chance to guide someone else. David, for example, repeatedly asked for help from his friends to spell words for his letter. One day I asked David to guide Casey on the spelling of the word *liked*. David's confidence

immediately increased, which would not have been possible without my persuasion. I wrote a journal note to myself to create a similar situation for Casey in the future. Several days later Casey and I were working on a project, and he was able to guide Kevin through the spelling of a word.

I found the children relied on Chris and Linda more than some of the other students. The children respected them and I believe they felt assured of success when asking for assistance. This added a certain degree of pressure for Linda and Chris as they felt that they always needed to be prepared to help others. Occasionally, they would neglect their own work because they spent so much time guiding others. Chris enjoyed helping but sometimes resented the interruptions to his work. On more than one occasion, he voiced his preference not to help a student. One day he approached me and asked why everyone asked him for the spelling of words. He and I talked about how his friends looked up to him and wanted his help in their learning, and if he did not care to help, he could just tell them nicely that he did not wish to do so. After Chris and I talked, he seemed to be more willing to help because he rarely refused a friend in need of assistance. Linda had similar concerns. Linda and I discussed the benefit of helping others. We reviewed the unique atmosphere of our classroom and the support we can offer to others. To alleviate the pressure on Chris and Linda, I reminded the children to ask a different person each time they needed assistance.

7. While the children were independently writing they used inventive spelling I also found the parents' letters with incorrect spellings.

Each child wrote independently to create a letter to his or her parent. It was not the intention of this exercise to create a stressful environment. Our classroom activities were designed to allow each child to write at his or her own developmental level. The students felt additional pressure to write on a higher ability level when corresponding with parents. I had to reassure the children the parents would be excited to read the journal entries and proud of what they accomplished. I needed the parents to understand Vygotsky's (1978) viewpoint to ". . . temporarily ignore the correctness and beauty of the letters . . . and focus on the content of what they write . . ." (p. 117). During Back-To-School Night I reiterated this importance to the parents to accept all attempts by the children to write correctly even with inventive spelling.

Bode's (1988) research discussed the importance of "Adults . . . to model the correct spelling of words chosen by the child and to model correct mechanics" (p. 5). I viewed the parents' responses as a guide to help the students through their writings. What I found on several occasions failed to provide an appropriate model. Some parents wrote back using non-standard English and incorrect spelling of words. When this occurred I guided the child trying not to highlight the parent's errors.

8. The journals offered a connection between the home and school, but not all parents used the opportunity to guide their child.

The dialogue journals offered the children reality-based instruction centered in the home. The children were able to choose their own topics. This allowed freedom in their writing and an independent experience from the other children. The children utilized the information taught in the classroom, determined the greatest area of importance, and used that topic to create a dialogue with their parent. Freire (1993) feels “The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and reconsiders her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (p. 81). This reinforces the ability of each student to apply and relate classroom instruction to develop his or her own personal experiences.

Delpit (2002) states, “Teachers seldom know much about the children’s lives and communities outside of the classroom . . .” (p. 41) which may lead to a disconnection of education. The dialogue journals provided an opportunity for the home community of each child to become more integrated into our classroom environment. I hoped that each child would relate more appropriately to the instruction when a connection extended beyond our classroom to the home through weekly communication.

Many parents visited our classroom during the year expressing how much they enjoyed the journals. The parents liked hearing stories they might not have

heard if the child had not written about these topics in the journals. They appreciated hearing about what we learned, not just in the journal, but also through the additional verbal communication the journal initiated. They felt included and connected to the educative experience of their child.

I wanted the children to realize the value of reviewing the response of their parent. Many of the children had written questions to their parents, and the parents wrote answers back to them. My goal was to encourage more children to include questions in their journals as well as reflective answers. This provided an opportunity for mini lessons on the guidelines to create dialogue communication. The children were taught techniques to respond to parents and answer their questions in the same format to keep the communication fluent.

Linda and her Dad were ideal dialogue journal correspondents. Her Dad asked questions and wrote in a way that facilitated an easy response from Linda. However, not all parents responded as effectively. That was fine because I was happy for their responses in all attempts. So many of the children would write a new entry and not try tie into their parent's response. At time this was the more effective way because I found that some of the parents' responses were not the models I had expected to generate.

From my observations of the entries, most parents took their time and wrote a meaningful response to continue the dialogue with their child. However, a few parents wrote very limited responses that offered little or no guidance for

the child's letter. Occasionally, several parents used incorrect spelling and non-standard English, which could have inevitably confused the children. When this happened to a child, I did my best to provide the child with a more appropriate model to use as a guide.

9. The children were able to write about personal things but some lost their excitement with the inconsistent responses.

In the classroom children are too often given instruction without providing a connection to practical application. Delpit (2002) feels "Children are taught [too often] through worksheets or textbooks that make no reference to their lived experiences" (p. 40). The journals provided a medium whereby children wrote about school or about personal information. The dialogue between the children and their parents were individualized and provided a unique, personal experience. Morrow (2000) reports, "An emergent literacy program provides literacy learning opportunities that accommodate the wide range of knowledge, and experiences children bring with them as they enter school" (p.8).

Even though the children had the chance to write home about important events of our classroom, the enthusiasm was not always reciprocated at home. Two children repeatedly left their journals at home. This diminished the intended experience of the continual correspondence with the parents. Lopez (1990) agrees with Haley-James that "young writers need an audience in order to remain motivated to write" (p. 22). In absence of the parents' responses, I offered to

assume the parent's role temporarily as a correspondent. Both students preferred to continue to write to their parent. I assumed they felt if other students noticed they did not have their journals, it would be thought they forgot the journal, not that their parent was not corresponding with them. In retrospect, I believe I could have written back to the child even though his or her letter was not intended for me to show I supported the child's writing.

The children were instructed to return the journals to school every Monday so they would be available for our next entry. Repeatedly the journals were not returned in a timely manner. The inconsistency of successful return of all journals introduced a complication in keeping the communication constant. The instruction had to be withheld or modified until all students were adequately prepared and journals available to begin the response. If a child's journal was not available, the student wrote on a separate piece of paper and added the entry to the journal at another time. The journal experience was hindered without the response from the parent to build upon and enable the intended dialogue process.

Dewey (1938) believes, "Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into" (p. 38). It is apparent through the observations and conversations with the children the majority of them enjoyed writing. I feel the positive experience of the dialogue journals helped to move the children toward this enjoyment. I also feel the experiences of journal writing were enhanced by offering the children a



connection between our classroom and their home. I observed their increased enthusiasm to write in their dialogue journals as well as in other areas of the first grade curriculum. All students mastered topic selection and no longer needed sentence starters for the dialogue journal structure. However, a small group of students continued to have difficulty choosing a topic in other classroom writing assignments. Overwhelmingly, the majority of our class was creative, not just in our dialogue journal writing experience, but also in full interdisciplinary application. The students developed into productive journal writers, and they also exhibited successful writing in other academic areas.

### **REFLECTIVE PRACTICE**

The children and I continued to write in our journals after the official data collection period ended. The topics became more varied. The children no longer wrote exclusively about school. As the children became more comfortable in writing and their parent's responses, they began to write about more personal interests. Joey wrote about being a football star. Nick wrote about his birthday. The children began to also write to any member of their family who could provide a meaningful response. Each week Cassie wrote to a different member of her family, expressing her love for them. Julie and Kathleen both began writing to their grandmothers, while Allie started writing to her older sister, a former student of mine. Since Kevin had limited communication with home he chose to

correspond with another student in our classroom. The journals broadened our educational community by bringing everyone's family into our classroom.

Some children developed a strong preference to draw pictures to illustrate their letter and augment their writing. Previously, I did not allow students to draw until the writing process was completed. They are now allowed to draw before writing as suggested in Wagner, Nott, and Agnew's research (2001) to allow children illustration time as an effective transition to help children write.

The dialogue journals I shared here have been part of a group lesson where we all wrote at the same time. Recently students have begun to ask if they can write at will, and I have allowed them to do so. If they have something they want to write about to their family, they may write in their journals during free time. Any child who may have left his or her journal at home can write on a separate paper and add it to the journal at another time.

With the anticipation of a schedule with less interruptions for the remainder of the year, we will continue to write in our journals in a more consistent manner. While we are writing in our family journals, I will continue to help the children review what was written to them before they write a response. I want them not only to pay attention to the response received, but also how it was written.

Reflecting on the implementation of the dialogue journals, I remembered how I worried so much about my students. I worried that I might be imposing

undue pressure on them and increasing level of stress. After observing and working with the children regularly in their journals, their abilities exceeded my expectations! The children triumphed as children always do. Once I offered sentence starters and relaxed about the end product, the children began to enjoy the experience. I look forward to concluding the school year and returning the journals to the children with a collection of what we learned in first grade, illustrating a clear progression of their writing growth. I look forward to next year and repeating this experience with my new students.

In future implementation of dialogue journals I plan to initiate the directed writing experience in the journal itself in September. I realize the journals were an added variable that could have caused stress for the children. If they experience the journals from the first day of school along with the paper in the writing center, it could reduce anxieties.

Each time we write I will offer the children a list of words and/or sentence starters to choose from to help guide their writing. I will also reinforce the high frequency words in the beginning of the school year and add them to the word wall to offer the children a clear reference for words. I will provide multiple directed lessons to allow the children more writing experiences before implementing corresponding in the journals to reduce the frustrations previously experienced in this process and stated earlier. I may even offer the children the experience of writing with a partner. I frequently asked the children to "stretch

out" the word, but many of them were not able to hear the sounds they needed to stretch. I will include more teacher directed activities on sounds so they could experience success earlier with encoding words. Some children needed more experience of words being stretched out for them before they can do it for themselves. Working with a friend who will guide them could also offer a child increased confidence. I also plan to have the children writing in their daily journals everyday, as I have in the past. I am disappointed that I neglected them this year. Children need to be able to write everyday to grow as writers.

I want them to experience increased confidence in writing before they start to write to an audience outside of the classroom. I also feel the added variable of the parent could have caused more stress than I anticipated. Maybe we should start the dialogue in the journal with me and then later write to the parents. I found the parents response valuable, but I offered no real guidance or guidelines for the parents. I am sure the parents did not intentionally respond with non-standard English or incorrect spellings, but I could have done something to help them. I plan to look into the research Lopez (1990) and Bode (1988 and 1989) completed for strategies to facilitate effective parent responses. I also hope to find more recent research to include parents in the educative experience. I will also review research regarding children sharing their writing with an audience. Writer's Workshop provides the children an opportunity to share a story with the class and ask for comments and suggestions. When they wrote in their daily

journals, they shared with the class to celebrate the writing. However, when they wrote in their dialogue journals they only shared their writing with Mrs. Finkel and me and then brought the writing home to their parents. Should I consider having the children share the dialogue journal entries with the class as an added exercise? Or should I allow the children to keep their personal writing to their parents private? Should I even read their entries?

My thought is to initiate correspondence with the student and an adult in November next year. I hope the children to have more confidence in themselves as writers after many directed writing lessons and corresponding with me in their journals. I hope to celebrate every child's successes as they occur. The structure of the letter to the parent will evolve for each child individually. The content of the letter is more important than the context.

I plan to revisit Wollman-Bonilla's (2001) research where she observed two first grade classrooms writing in dialogue journals daily. I want to review these teachers' implementations and guidelines. How can I write in our journals more consistently and experience prompt returns of the journals? I also want to refer back to Calkins (1994) for additional authentic assessment strategies. Next year I will devise a conference checklist to document each child's growth. Calkins believes "Assessment allows us to have a 'minds-on approach' to all our teaching" (p. 334). I will include more comprehensive notes to guide my instruction for the whole group as well as individual students. What did I

overlook by not keeping notes on one sheet? Could my research have been more comprehensive by additional cross-referencing of skills that needed classroom instruction and attention? I look forward to the children not only learning from me but from each other as well. And I am really looking forward to learning from the children as we continue dialogue about each child's experience through the journals and High Five Thinking!

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Appendix A  
Principal Consent Form

Dear HSIRB Board,

As principal of the Any School in Any Town, America I am aware of Miss Amy Lynn Alvarez and her requirements to complete her Master of Education degree at Moravian College. I understand she needs to conduct a systematic study of her own teaching practices. Miss Alvarez's research entitled, "Dialogue Journals – Talking about Learning through Writing" will benefit her students by developing and strengthening reading and writing skills through weekly dialogue journal writing.

I understand as part of her study Miss Alvarez's students will be asked once a week to write a letter in their journal to a willing adult about what they have learned that week in school. After the student has written a letter, he/she will read it to the participating adult who will write back to the student. The student will then read what the adult has written. The following week the students will read their most recent entry and response and then write another letter to the same adult. The study will be conducted from September 29, 2003 through December 19, 2003.

Miss Alvarez's data will be collected and coded and will be held in the strictest confidence. No one, except Miss Alvarez, will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the research, all data not presented in the final research report will be destroyed.

All of the students will be keeping a dialogue journal with a willing adult as part of the regular first grade classroom activity. A student may choose at any time not to participate in this study. Miss Alvarez will only use writing samples, observations, and information from her researcher's journal and field log of her consenting students. In no way will participation, non-participation, or withdrawal during the study have any influence on any aspect of the class or grade.

If you have any questions about your consent, please feel free to contact me at our phone number; and I wish Miss Alvarez the best of luck in her research endeavors.

Sincerely,

Principal Name  
Any School

Appendix B  
Parent / Guardian Consent Form

Dear Parents / Guardians:

I am completing a Master of Education degree at Moravian College. My courses have enabled me to learn about the most effective teaching methods. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. This semester I am focusing my research on writing development shown through weekly journals. The title of my research is "Dialogue Journals – Talking about Learning through Writing." My students will benefit from participating in this study by developing and strengthening reading and writing skills through weekly dialogue journal writing.

All students will be keeping a dialogue journal with a willing adult as part of the regular first grade curriculum. The willing adult can be a family member, guardian, teacher, or another agreed-upon significant adult in the student's life. (Another letter will follow for the students to choose a significant adult). After students have written their letter, they will read it to the participating adult who will write back to the student. The student will then read what the adult has written. The following week my students will read most recent entry and response and then write a new letter to the same adult. On a weekly basis, entries will be read and discussed with the students. I will only use writing samples, observations and conferences, and information for my researcher's journal and field log of my consenting students and participating adults. The study will be conducted from September 29, 2003 through December 19, 2003.

The data will be collected and coded and will be held in the strictest confidence. No one, except me, will have access to the data. Results will be presented using pseudonyms for the names of the students. All the children's names will be kept confidential. Neither your child's name nor the name of the school will appear in any written report or publication of the study and its findings. Data will be locked in a cabinet in my house. At the end of the research, all data not presented in the final research report will be destroyed.

All of the students will be keeping a dialogue journal with a willing adult as part of the regular first grade curriculum. A student may choose, at any time not to participate in this study by informing me that he or she wishes to withdraw. I will only use writing samples, observations, and information from my researcher's journal and field log of my consenting students and adults. In no way will participation, non-participation, or withdrawal during the study have any influence on any aspect of the class or grade.

I welcome questions about this research at any time. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty or consequence. Any questions about the research can be directed to me, Miss Amy Lynn Alvarez, my phone number or my e-mail address, or my advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh, Education Department, Moravian College, at his phone number or e-mail address.

Sincerely,

Miss Amy Lynn Alvarez



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I agree to allow my son / daughter to take part in this project. I understand that my son / daughter can choose to withdraw at any time.

---

Parent / Guardian Signature

Date

**Appendix C**  
**Adult Participant Consent Form**

Dear           (Name of Adult Child is asking to Participate)          ,

I am completing a Master of Education degree at Moravian College. My courses have enabled me to learn about the most effective teaching methods. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. This semester I am focusing my research on writing development shown through weekly journals. The title of my research is "Dialogue Journals – Talking about Learning through Writing." My students will benefit from participating in this study by developing and strengthening reading and writing skills through weekly dialogue journal writing.

All students will be keeping a dialogue journal with a willing adult as part of the regular first grade curriculum. The willing adult can be a family member, guardian, teacher, or another agreed-upon significant adult in the student's life.           (Student name)           has chosen you to correspond in his/her journal.

On a weekly basis, the students and the adult entries may be read and discussed with students during a conference. After reading the entries I may write field notes, or keep writing samples to gain information and to determine what mini-lessons will benefit the students' development. I will be using writing samples showing the correspondence between a child and their participating adult, as well as individual student writing samples, participating adult writing samples, observations, and information from my researcher log and field log of my consenting students and participating adults. The study will be conducted from September 29, 2003 through December 19, 2003.

The data will be collected and coded and will be held in the strictest confidence. No one, except me, will have access to the data. Results will be presented using pseudonyms for the names of the students. All the children's names and participating adult names will be kept confidential. Neither your child's name, participating adult names, nor the name of the school will appear in any written report or publication of the study and its findings. Data will be locked in a cabinet in my house. At the end of the research, all data not presented in the final research report will be destroyed.

All of the students will be keeping a dialogue journal with a willing adult as part of the regular first grade curriculum. As a participant in my study the participating adult may choose, at any time not to participate by informing me they wish to withdraw. I will only use writing samples, and information from my researcher's journal and field log of my consenting adults. In no way will participation, non-participation, or withdrawal during the study have any influence on any aspect of the class.

I know we are all very busy, but this journal will give a special time together of reading and writing personal ideas. Each week you will see the child growing as a reader and a writer; and at the end of the year, it will be a wonderful memory book of first grade.

Make sure to return the journal to school by Monday so that we have them for the following week.

Happy Journaling!

Sincerely,

Miss Amy Lynn Alvarez

✂

I agree to participate in Miss Alvarez's research study. I understand I may choose to withdraw at any time from the study.

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

## Letter to Parents Inside Journal

Dear Parents,

Our class has decided to start a family journal. Each week the children will write a letter to you about school. They will reach deep into their brains and try their hardest to spell words correctly. We know that all the words will not be perfect but we are growing and learning more everyday. When the children bring their book home, please sit with them so they can read to you what they wrote. Take care not to correct your child's spelling because they did their very best.

When you write back to your child, please sit with him/her and have them read what you wrote. Please remember to print your letter so your child can read it. It would also be great if you would try to use a word your child might have spelled incorrectly so they can see and read the correct spelling. This increases their chance of a correct spelling the next time your child attempts the word.

I know we are all very busy, but this journal will give a special time together of reading and writing personal ideas. Each week you will see your child growing as a reader and a writer. At the end of the year it will be a wonderful memory book what we accomplished in first grade.

Make sure to return the journal to school by Monday so that we have them for the following week.

Happy Journaling!  
Miss Alvarez