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Home and school partnership to nurture kindergarten children's writing ability

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Home and school partnership to nurture kindergarten children's writing ability

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to develop a home-school partnership in kindergarten, called Home + School = Writing. The goals of the program are to extend parents' understanding of the writing process and its value in young children's lives and to offer them suggestions about how the home can support children's emerging writing abilities. Before developing the program, a search of the professional literature will be conducted and then reviewed in the paper.

Home and School Partnership
to Nurture Kindergarten Children's Writing Ability

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Jessielee Frieden

May 1995

This Project by: Jessielee Frieden

Entitled: Home and School Partnership to Nurture Kindergarten
Children's Writing Ability

has been approved as meeting a project requirement for the Degree
of Master of Arts in Education.

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Introduction

Rationale of the Project

The emerging literacy of young children is currently receiving much attention. In response to this concern, educators are recognizing that school-based reading and writing programs are more effective when parents are involved. Studies of reading achievement indicate that when children spend time reading outside the school environment, there are impressive gains; therefore, one would expect that time spent writing outside of school would result in gains in writing achievement (Reutzel & Fawson, 1990). Parents and educators need to work together to help children become lifelong readers and writers by creating environments with many reading and writing experiences and with adults modeling involvement in the reading and writing processes for real purposes (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1991).

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to develop a home-school partnership in kindergarten, called *Home + School = Writing*. The goals of the program are to extend parents' understanding of the writing process and its value in young children's lives and to offer them suggestions about how the home can support children's emerging writing abilities. Before developing the program, a search of the professional literature will be conducted and then reviewed in the paper.

Importance of the Project

Parents need to understand that writing is as important as reading in children's lives. Reading and writing abilities develop simultaneously (Dailey, 1991). The processes of reading and writing are inseparable. When children write, they are also reading; therefore, reading and writing are connected (Calkins, 1983).

In the writer's school, much has been done to help parents nurture their young children's reading abilities, but little has been done with writing. When parents understand the writing process, they will know what to expect of their children and can encourage their writing.

Procedures of the Project

In initiating this project, five families were chosen. A meeting was held with these parents at the beginning of the school year to discuss young children's responses while writing and to present the *Home + School = Writing* project. At this meeting, parents were given two articles "Writing in Kindergarten," by Kathleen A. Dailey, and "The Second Best Reading Advice for Parents, by Timothy V. Rasinski and Anthony D. Fredericks. Main points from each article were highlighted for the parents with discussion and questions following. Parents were given the "Widely Held Expectations in Writing Development" from *The Primary Program* (A Joint Project of the Nebraska

Department of Education and Iowa Department of Education, 1993). This handout gave the parents an understanding of what to expect from their children's writing.

Booklets for the children's writing were given to each family at this meeting. The children shared with their parents what they have written. On the back of the children's written pieces, the parents wrote what their children had told them of their ideas in their written pieces. In most cases, the children's writing was unintelligible: scribbles, letters, and parts of words. Parents and their children were asked to write at least once a week in these booklets. The children brought their booklets to school and shared their writing with the teacher. The teacher contributed positive notes as well as suggestions on the back of the children's pieces under the parents' notes. As the project progresses, the children shared their writing with the principal.

Pertinent Terms to the Study

Reading and writing processes refer to children's involvement in the language processes to create meaning.

Early literacy refers to young children's emerging language abilities.

Nonphonetic letter strings are lists of letters children write to represent what they have to say but do not represent the conventional spelling.

Phonetic (or invented) spelling is lists of letters that represent sounds the children hear when writing words but do not represent conventional spelling.

Conventional orthography refers to the correct spelling of words.

Review of Professional Literature

Oral language, reading, and writing develop together and are interrelated in literate environments (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Young children communicate by listening and speaking and both these processes support learning to read and write (Strickland & Morrow, 1988c). Walton (1989) relates, "Children grow into reading and writing the same way they develop oral language. When they are immersed in an environment that requires, uses, and demonstrates the usefulness of print, children explore, invent, create, and try out print-related activities" (p. 52). Learning to write is as natural for children as learning to talk (Hoffman, 1987). Children learn to write like they learn to speak by using a grafting process which is constructing letters and words from what they already know (Clay, 1987). An essential element in the literacy development of young children is to see their oral language written down (Danielson, 1992). When young children talk about their scribbling, they are giving meaning to their scribbles (Taylor & Strickland, 1986).

From their study of early literacy, Dickinson and Tabors (1991) conclude that children's language development is nurtured by the oral language experiences that occur in the home and in the classroom. Teachers are finding the need to learn more about their students' families because families do influence learning (Voss, 1993). Parents play an important part in their children's learning to talk, listen, read, and write (Hill, 1989). Hoffman (1987) relates, "Literacy learning has roots in the home. The availability of reading and writing materials and modeling of parents' own reading and writing behaviors encourage children to be participants in home literacy events" (p. 356). When children see their parents writing to Grandma and paying bills, they will want to write to Grandma and pay bills too (Clay, 1987). Many families communicate with each other using print, such as writing notes and memos. In literate families, children are expected to learn to read and write (Taylor, 1983).

Parents can inspire their children to read and write by creating a home environment that promotes literacy (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1991). The best teaching parents and teachers can offer children is to give them positive experiences that will help them understand the purposes of literacy. These experiences will help children develop self-confidence; and as a result, they will believe that they are capable of being readers and writers (Walton, 1989).

If children's environments are print rich, literacy will be a natural part of their experiences (Parkes, 1986). In print rich environments, children can be encouraged to read and write by being actively involved in the functions of language found in the home and school. For example, when children play restaurant, school, house, office, and hospital, they can be given opportunities to read and write (Strickland & Morrow, 1988b). Children, who shop with their parents, can learn that the shopping list is a useful way to organize a shopping trip. Children can see that written language is a tool to facilitate an experience (Hall, 1987).

The first written language that is recognizable to children is environmental print (Parkes, 1986). Young children enter the world of reading and writing when they begin to make sense of print in their environment (Hill, 1989). Environmental print, such as road signs and labels on food boxes, can be read by preschoolers; therefore, using environmental print is important when encouraging reading and writing (Strickland & Morrow, 1988a). When young children experience environmental print, they not only learn to read the words but discover that those words represent a message (Hall, 1987).

In the preschool program *Parents as Teachers*, Winter and Rouse (1990) report that educators work with parents, emphasizing that they are their children's first and most important language

teachers. Parents are viewed as most knowledgeable of their young children's development. Professionals are viewed as having knowledge about child development to share with parents. If professionals can help parents believe that they are their children's first and most important teachers, then schools will be making a difference in children's literacy.

In an instructional development project conducted by Shook, Marrion, & Ollila (1989), parents were encouraged to promote writing at home because children write first for their parents and then their teachers. Hannon & James (1990) found in working with parents that they needed information about emerging literacy and how to encourage such abilities.

The discussion in the following paragraphs reviews important information about how parents can support their children's emerging literacy.

When parents read to their children, they learn a sense of peace and security (Hill, 1989). Taylor and Strickland (1986) believe that parents sharing storybooks with their young children is one way for parents to give meaning to everyday experiences. When children are read to, they learn how to hold a book, how pages are turned, what letters, words, and sentences mean, and more importantly, that print represents the author's message.

When adults listen to children while they write and ask them to share what they have written, they will discover what the

children are learning (Hill, 1989). One way for parents to observe writing development is to keep dated samples of their children's writing (Clay, 1987). In a study done by Taylor (1983), writing samples were kept or copied in order to study family literacy.

Taylor & Strickland (1986) believe that the best gifts to give young children are books, a pad of plain paper, colors, and felt pens. When children have space, time, and materials, such as pencils, pens, magic markers, crayons, wrapping paper, cardboard scraps, different colors and sizes of paper, they will be interested in writing and their writing will develop. To learn directional principles, moving left to right, top to bottom, and then sweeping back quickly from right to left to start again, it is suggested that children use unlined paper (Clay, 1987). One way to encourage writing is to have parents and their young children make books together (Taylor & Strickland, 1986).

In their early writing experiences, children need supportive adults, because they will spell words unconventionally. When parents have an understanding of the writing process, they will be more accepting of their children's approach to spelling (Dailey, 1991). As children develop, they use many different forms of spelling: scribbling, drawing, nonphonetic letter strings, phonetic (or invented) spelling, and

conventional orthography. It seems that there should be a developmental progression through these writing phases, but this is not necessarily true (Sulzby, Teale, & Kamberelis, 1989). When the demands of the writing tasks increase, the forms of writing appear less mature (Barnhart & Sulzby, 1986). Children may use invented spelling to write words, but when asked to write a story, they may use less mature-appearing forms of writing (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

One important step in young children's writing development is their ability to tell the difference between drawing and writing (Chan & Louie, 1992; Sulzby, 1993; Walton, 1989). When children make cards, they often draw their families and write messages, such as "I love you." By creating cards with drawings and messages, children begin to differentiate between drawing and writing (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). An important step in writing development is when children realize the message is represented by the print (Clay, 1987).

Children begin to learn to read and write early in their lives. Teachers and parents are finding the importance of listening to stories their children have written. These stories may be scribbles and intelligible only to the writers (Strickland, 1990). When children read and write stories, they are developing meaning through engaging in the writing process.

When meaning is created, children will learn about themselves and the world in which they live (Franklin, 1988).

The Project

In September, the kindergartners delivered invitations to their parents requesting information about their children. The invitation read,

HELLO,

Now that school has gotten off to a great start I am asking you to take a few minutes to reflect and write about your child. What would you like me to know about your child? Please use the space below to provide any information you wish to share. Return upon completion. Many thanks.

The parents who returned lengthy and informational replies were considered for the project. These parents would probably take an active part in their children's education. Prior association with the families at school served as another criterion. The third criterion was families not likely to move during the school year. Five families were chosen to participate in the *Home + School = Writing* pilot program.

The five families gave verbal agreements to participate in the *Home + School = Writing* project. On September 12, 1994, written agreements were sent home to the parents. The agreement (see Appendix A) contained a brief explanation of the project, an

invitation to the parents to attend an informational meeting, and a written confirmation of participation in this home-school partnership. Every family returned the agreements to the school. Then, telephone calls were made to each family to thank each one for agreeing to participate in the project and to personally invite them to the meeting.

The parent meeting was held at Hoover Elementary in Mason City, Iowa in the kindergarten room on Tuesday, September 20, 1994 with five mothers and two fathers attending. After introductions, thank yous were again expressed to the parents for agreeing to participate in this project. The reason for conducting the *Home + School = Writing* project was discussed. It was explained to the parents that they were involved in a *Home/School Reading Program* that promoted reading in the home but that the writing process was not addressed in this reading program. The connection of the reading and writing processes was explained to the parents. The *Home + School = Writing* program would involve kindergartners and their parents in the writing process too. The parents were given "Writing in Kindergarten," by Kathleen A. Dailey; "The Second Best Reading Advice for Parents," by Timothy V. Rasinski and Anthony D. Fredericks; and "Widely Held Expectations in Writing Development," from *The Primary Program* (A Joint Project of the Nebraska Department of Education and Iowa Department of Education, 1993). Important

points about writing discussed from the articles were: the importance of both the home and school environments offering children positive opportunities for writing, the importance of children learning the purposes for reading and writing, and the importance of parents understanding the writing development of young children.

At this same meeting, the *Home + School = Writing* booklets for the children's writing were distributed to the parents. The illustration on the cover of the children's writing booklet depicted an enlarged, brightly-colored pencil and the words, *Home + School = Writing*. The cover and back of each booklet were created with 9 x 12 pieces of colored construction paper that were laminated to protect the booklet during transport between home and school. The inside of the booklet consisted of various colors of unlined paper arranged in a color pattern. The booklet was bound with metal rings.

The parents were asked to introduce their children to the booklets by discussing with them the need to move through the booklet from front to back one page at a time and to date each entry. Parents were asked not to write on the same page as their children. When their children finished an entry, the parents were to say something like, "Tell me what you wrote." Then, their children would respond by sharing with their parents the ideas in their writing. On the back of each entry, parents were

asked to write using conventional spelling what their children had shared. During the meeting one of the parents said, "When I have asked my child to write something, the child will say, "I can't write." These suggestions for promoting children's involvement in the writing process were offered: parents can talk to their children about what they would like to write about, can ask their children, "How could you write that?," and can explain to their children that they do not need to write like "grown-ups." Parents seemed thrilled with the booklets. One mother said, "Do we get to keep the booklets at the end of this project?" Parents were asked to have their children return the booklets at least once a week to share with the teacher who would then write positive remarks and suggestions on the back of the children's entries.

After this meeting, the project unfolded and progressed as planned. In December, a letter (see Appendix B) was sent to the parents. The letter reinforced what the parents were doing and gave suggestions that would continue to encourage their children in the writing process. The project was culminated in March, 1995.

The children's writing abilities at the onset and at the conclusion of the *Home + School = Writing* project will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Child A

Child A wrote 29 entries in the *Home + School = Writing* booklet. At the onset of this project, Child A drew pictures to tell a story. When writing, Child A did not use letters or letter-like forms (see Figure 1).

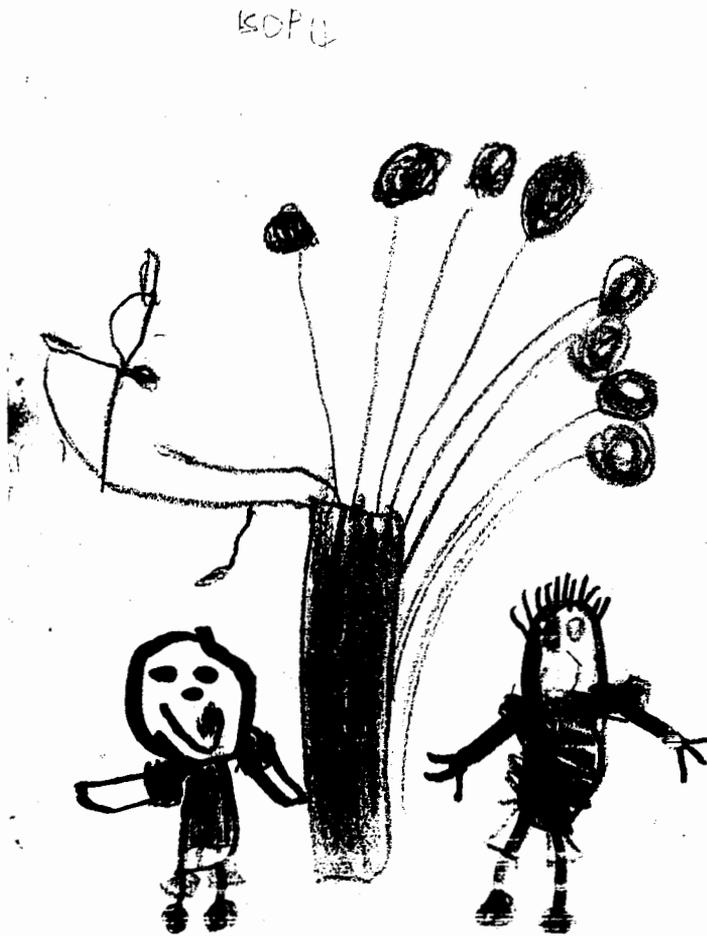


Figure 1

As the project progressed, Child A wrote strings of letters moving from left to right, wrote conventional words (e.g., Mom,

Dad, cat), and used speech bubbles. At the conclusion of the project, Child A drew pictures and wrote words using inventive spelling ("B-y-THeTiMiGOT HOME MIdoGSITING IN ACHAR:", translated ("By the time I got home my dog was sitting in a chair.")). When writing, Child A moved from left to right and from top to bottom. The child did not always leave spaces between words. Both upper and lower case letters were used (see Figure 2).

B-y-THeTiMiGOT
 HOME MIdoGSITING
 IN ACHAR:
 e-s-p5



Figure 2

Child A' parents felt the *Home + School = Writing* project was beneficial. They said that their child was excited about the project and proud of the progress made. They observed their

child's growth, beginning with drawing pictures, then letters, then consonant letters grouped together, and finally some full words by the end of the project. Child A's parents said, "We now understand the steps a child goes through when learning to read and write."

Child B

Child B wrote 26 entries in the *Home + School = Writing* booklet. At the onset of the project, Child B used some conventional spelling (e.g., own name, cat, dog) (see Figure 3).

SEPTEMBER 21 1994
 APPLE - 2 - FER - RAC
 CAT GUY
 DOG

RACHEL

Figure 3

As the project progressed, Child B drew pictures labeling objects and people, wrote strings of letters, experimented with

punctuation marks (exclamation points and periods), and used a dash (-) between words. At the conclusion of the project, Child B drew pictures and wrote words using inventive spelling ("HRSiSRaN."), translated to ("Hearts is all around."). Child B moved from left to right, used a period at the end of the sentence, and wrote both upper and lower case letters. There were no spaces between words (see Figure 4).

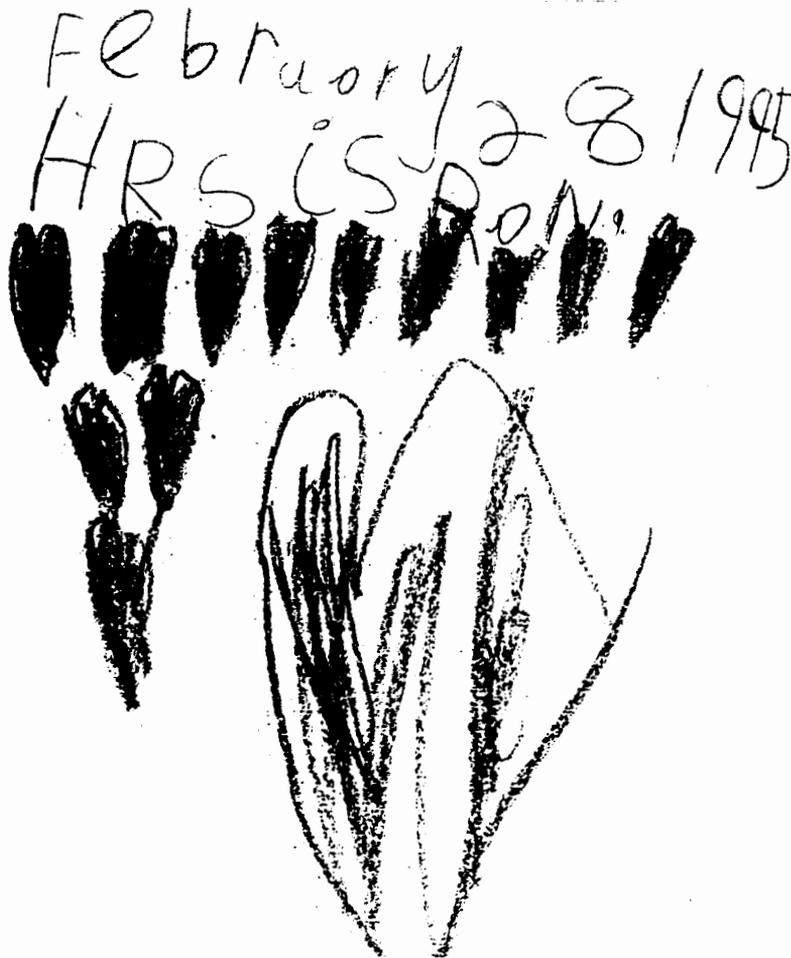


Figure 4

It was difficult for Child B's mother to accept imperfect spelling of words. She said that she was taught that words were either spelled correctly or incorrectly. This mother enjoyed observing her child's progress from those first attempts at writing to more creative, complex writing. The suggestion to write first and then illustrate was helpful. The mother stated that she and her child enjoyed spending time together reading the comments the teacher wrote. The comments were positive; therefore, her child wanted the comments read two or three times. The mother said that her child enjoyed writing and often spent her free time writing.

Child C

Child C wrote 26 entries in the *Home + School = Writing* booklet. At the onset of the project, Child C wrote strings of letters and drew pictures to tell a story (see Figure 5).

As the project progressed, Child C went through a stage in which she told her mother she was writing cursive which resembled scribbling. Child C's mother had to persuade her to be a risk-taker and write what she thought the words looked like. Child C experimented with punctuation marks (exclamation points, commas, and periods). At the conclusion of the project, Child C drew pictures and wrote words using inventive spelling ("I HAV A CAT. HiZ nAM is GAB I-LOVe-you"), translated ("I have a cat. His name is Gabe. I love you."). Child C moved from left to right and

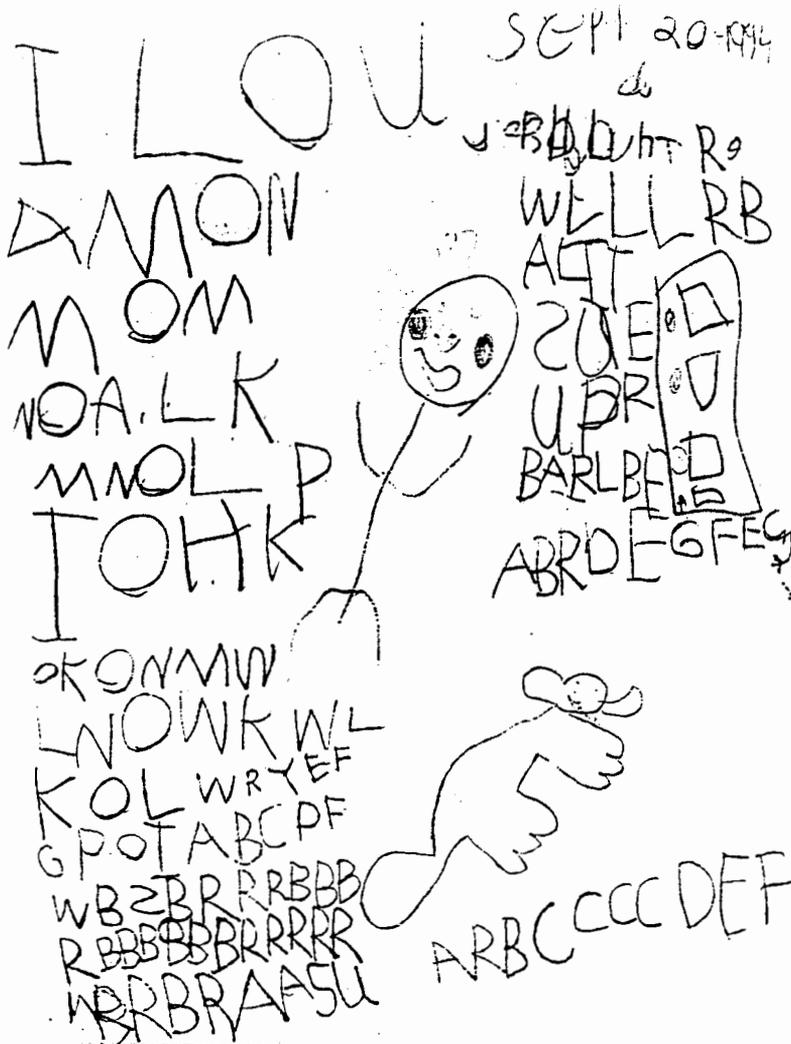


Figure 5

from top to bottom, used spaces between words, included a period, and wrote both upper and lower case letters (see Figure 6).

Child C's mother took writing for granted; therefore, the *Home + School = Writing* project gave her a better understanding

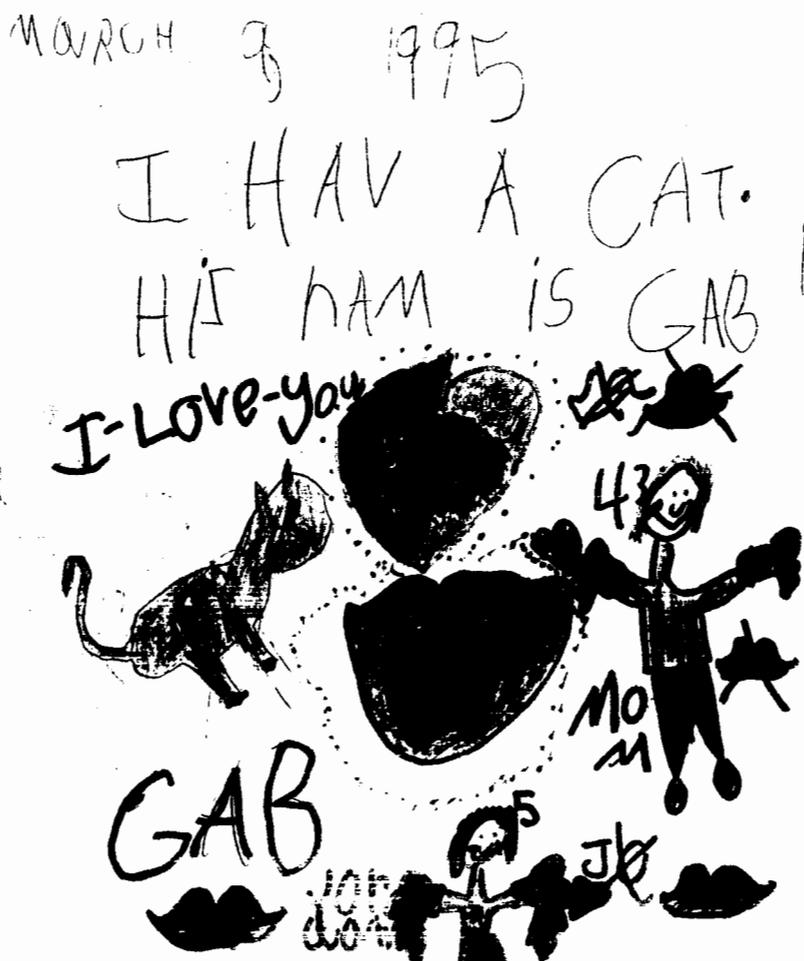


Figure 6

of writing development. This mother said that at first when her child wrote in the booklet her attention span was short until her child understood that when letters were put together they spelled words. Child C's mother expressed amazement at the progress her child made in the writing process from scribbling, to writing letters, to writing actual words, and finally to writing sentences. This mother observed her child gaining a new confidence and enthusiasm for writing. Initially, Child C was

fearful and frustrated with writing but as the project progressed the mother observed her child approaching the writing process as an interesting challenge. The mother felt the best part of the *Home + School = Writing* project was the time they spent together working in the booklet. Child C enjoyed showing her booklet to anyone who would look at it. The mother said that the *Home + School = Writing* project had helped her child learn to read many words. The project, also, helped her child gain confidence and to feel comfortable when writing notes and cards to friends and family.

Child D

Child D wrote 24 entries in the *Home + School = Writing* booklet. At the onset of the project, Child D usually drew pictures and wrote a few conventional spellings (e.g., own name, Mom) (see Figure 7).

As the project progressed, Child D continued to draw pictures, experimented with speech bubbles, and on a few of the entries wrote strings of letters. In telling oral stories to her family, Child D's responses showed much imagination and a well-developed vocabulary (e.g., lasso, hedgehog, tower, furious, captured, and impostor). At the conclusion of the project, Child D drew pictures and wrote letter strings. Child D was beginning to use inventive spelling ("PMONAnHP"), translated



Figure 7

("mountain"). On the last entry, Child D wrote a speech bubble that said, "I love" (see Figure 8).

Child D's mother said that she had knowledge of the writing process from observing her older children. She related that at the beginning of the *Home + School = Writing* project, the child was able to recite the alphabet but did not recognize letters.

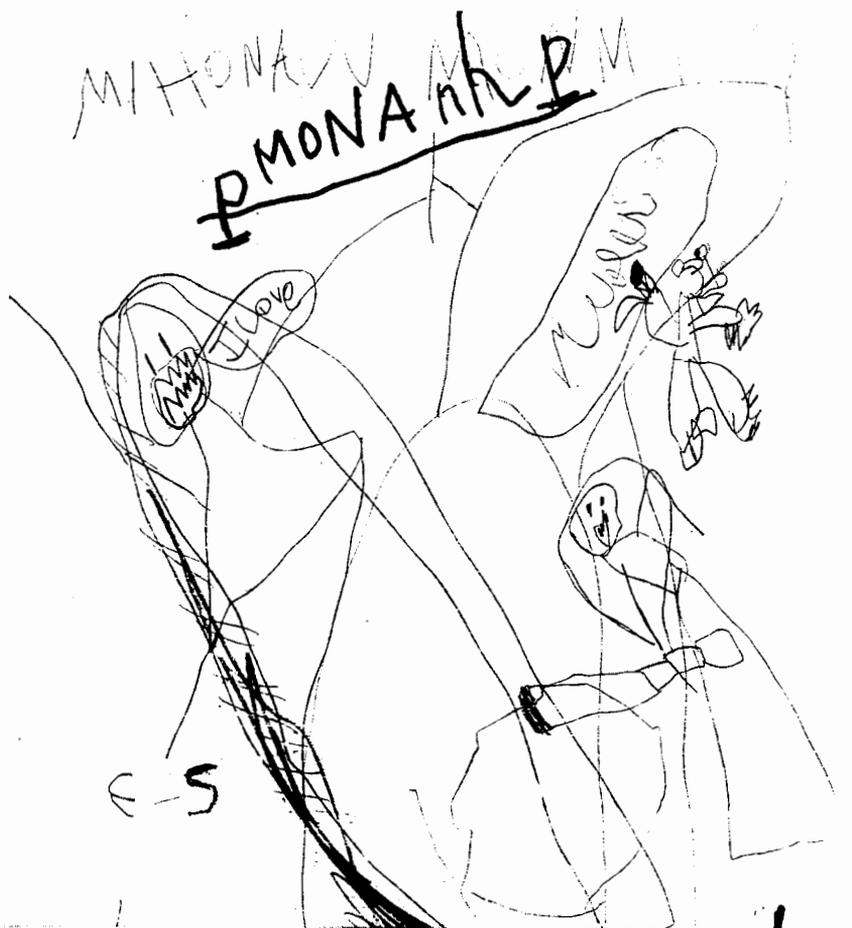


Figure 8

The mother stated that her child would not accept the fact that drawing was a way to write. As the project progressed, Child D received satisfaction from writing some letters and then from writing parts of words. The part of the *Home + School = Writing* project that Child D's mother enjoyed was observing her child's imagination and thoughts. The mother said, "My child was preoccupied this whole year with babies, and this sparked some interesting talks between the two of us especially in regard to

our adoption of the children and their development inside another mommy." The mother felt reading the *Home + School = Writing* booklet was just as meaningful as reading an older child's journal.

Child E

Child E wrote 25 entries in the *Home + School = Writing* booklet. At the onset of the project, Child E drew pictures and labeled people in the pictures (see Figure 9).

SEPTEMBER 21-1994

Maddy



Figure 9

As the project progressed, Child E continued to write names of people but wrote the word "and" between the names. Child E

wrote simple sentences using inventive spelling and used a dash (-) between words. At the conclusion of the project, Child E drew pictures and used inventive spelling ("I GOT a NEW VaN It is GReeN aNd It Has SavN SET."), translated ("I got a new van. It is green and it has seven seats."). Child E moved from left to right and from top to bottom, used spaces between words, used periods at the end of sentences, and wrote both upper and lower case letters (see Figure 10).

MARCH 4-1995
 I GOT a NEW VAN It IS
 GREEN and It HAS
 SAVN S~~ET~~ 

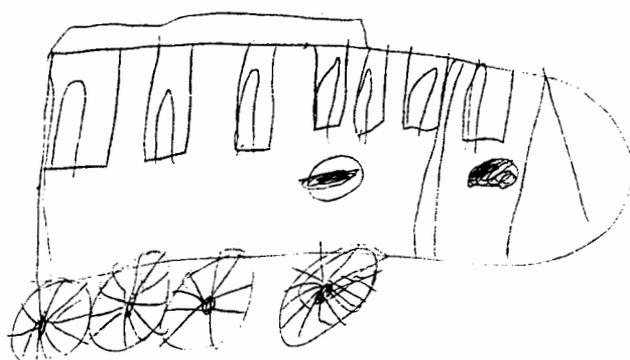


Figure 10

The parents of Child E enjoyed observing their child go from writing one word stories to writing three and four sentences in a story. They said that their child enjoyed bringing the

booklet back to school to read it to the teacher. Child E was excited to receive stickers and have her parents read the comments the teacher wrote. The mother stated that she was amazed at the number of words her child spelled by the end of the project.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The five families chosen nurtured their children's writing abilities. Through this *Home + School = Writing* project, the families became aware of young children's writing development and what to expect of their children's writing. The teacher gave suggestions and positive responses to the parents as the project progressed.

The children in the project gained confidence in their writing ability. For example, during a class discussion after the "Rabbit Road" mural had been completed, the children were discussing what they had written on their speech bubbles for the rabbits they had created. Child C remarked, "We learned how to write because we had our writing booklets." During journal writing time, the five children involved in the *Home + School = Writing* project were observed taking risks and writing independently. Some of the children not in the project asked for more help from the teacher. They were reluctant to take risks and write what they thought words looked like.

The responses of one of the mothers in the project is an example of the project's benefits for parents. When she visited one day during writing activity time, she volunteered to assist the children. It was thrilling to observe her because she knew how to nurture the children's writing abilities.

If parents are willing to participate, the *Home + School = Writing* project will be worth repeating for all kindergartners during another school year. Time does become a factor for the teacher. First, time is needed because the children will want to read to the teacher what they wrote at home. Second, time is needed because the teacher will want to write positive notes and suggestions on the back of the children's entries. The children that were involved in the project this year brought their booklets to school displaying them with enthusiasm and definitely claimed ownership for their writing. While smiling, they eagerly turned the pages in their booklets to find the last entry they had written at home. Reading, with inflection in their voices, what they had written at home with their families was convincing that the reading and writing processes are connected and that home and school partnerships can nurture children's writing abilities.

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Appendix A

Agreement

September 12, 1994

Hi,

I am writing to ask you to participate with me in my Graduate Project. I am inviting 5 Hoover families to participate. It should be fun as well as a learning experience for all of us.

The Graduate Project has to do with involving kindergarten parents and their children in the writing process. Each of you will receive a *Home + School = Writing* booklet. I am asking that at least one or two times a week you be involved with your child in your home in the writing process. The *Home + School = Writing* booklet will travel back and forth in your child's school bag. I will make comments or suggestions as needed.

I plan on having a short meeting in the near future for all of us to discuss the project and the writing process. The meeting will possibly be this week yet or early next week depending on your schedules. I am hoping that at least one parent can attend this short meeting. Children do not need to come to this meeting. I will give each of you a call after I receive all the responses.

Please return the bottom section by Wed., Sept. 14. If you marked Yes, I thank you and look forward to this home-school writing partnership with great anticipation. See you soon and happy writing.

Please return this bottom section by Wed., Sept. 14.

Yes, I would like to participate in this home-school writing partnership.

No, I would not like to participate in this home-school writing partnership.

I was wondering if someone from your family (mom or dad) could meet on Thurs., Sept. 15 at 4:00 at Hoover Elementary? (yes or no) THANKS AGAIN!!!!!!

Appendix B

Letter of Encouragement

December 12, 1994

Hello and Happy Holidays to the *Home + School = Writing Families*,

I want to thank each one of you again for participating in this writing project. I am proud of your children and the writing progress they are demonstrating!! Thank you for writing on the back of your children's writing. I do appreciate the questions some of you have asked about your children's writing. Thanks for using ink when you have written what your children have told you they have written. It has been fun for me to listen to what your children have written at home. I am enjoying watching them use inventive spelling and reading left to right following along with their fingers! It is a super and exciting experience for me to watch their development!

Now for some suggestions! I hope that's ok with each of you. The children are learning the sounds of the letters, therefore I would like them to write words first before illustrating. Why? Sometimes we may feel too tired to write words after we spent time illustrating. Please try this. Have them think about what they would like to write about. Talk about what they want to write about. Tell them to write one or two words. Some of the children are already writing one or two sentences. That is truly tremendous for kindergarten. Again, do not tell them how to spell the words. Say, "Write what you think the word looks like." or "Write the sounds you hear." If you want to say the word slowly to them and have them say the letters they hear to you, that's fine. If they want to know a sound, I suggest saying, "What do you think that sound is?" If they tell you, PRAISE them. If the letter was not correct, PRAISE them for trying. Perhaps, give them another word with that same beginning sound. Again, PRAISE them. Tell them the letter if they were unable to get it from all your help. Remember, kindergarten children writing one or two letters for a word is great. If you see your children writing a word over and over for example the word "and" and they are spelling it "ad", I guess I would tell them the "grown-up" spelling of "and." To conclude, after your children have written something using letters, they can illustrate what they have written about.

HAPPY WRITING!

P.S. You can also begin talking about spaces between words and punctuation marks at home too. Any questions, please ask. Happy Holidays and Happy 1995 too.