Through a home-school journal project, teacher Mary Racicot seeks to create a strong connection between home and school for her students. Because she is working with kindergartners—students who by virtue of age have little writing history from which to draw—Racicot begins her project in the murkiest of writing places—the beginning. With new students, new writers, and an emerging writing community, the project is full of "firsts" that take all involved into unfamiliar territory.

Write From the Start
A Teacher Research Project

MARY RACICOT

Driving down the alley between the school and the old convent takes some maneuvering. Usually one has to put down the coffee and place both hands on the wheel or risk rolling over the broken bottles left by the homeless who routinely rummage through the dumpster. Although the building is over a hundred years old, it has the distinct advantage of bulletproof windows, a welcome donation. Unfortunately, bulletproof glass doesn't let in the sunshine. Teachers vie for rooms with the oldest windows, because even though the wind blows through, we know without a doubt that the sun is present at least a few days a week. This is where I teach.

Although the school, which is in Boston, is almost all white, culturally it is quite diverse. It is located in an economically depressed neighborhood, and many of our students live in low-income housing developments. In the mid-1990s, US News and World Report identified this section of the city as the number one white slum in America. Many students suffer the effects of family issues caused by alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, and the impact of single parenting.

During my first two years as the kindergarten teacher, I realized that to meet my students needs, it was imperative that I communicate with parents, guardians, and extended family members. I conducted a survey to learn about the cultural backgrounds of my students, including family origins, household composition, and educational backgrounds of parents or guardians. Through this and routine phone calls, I was able to identify cultural differences and have a better understanding of the needs of each student.

Despite the daily struggles faced by many of these families, one factor remained constant and evident; nearly all possessed a heartfelt interest in their children's education. Each morning, as parents dropped off their children, conversations would revolve around what was happening both at home and within the classroom. It was clear that parents or grandparents were eager to talk about the education of their children. The importance of connecting families to the classroom was evident... and worthy of further research.

When I Started My Research
As my research into creating a home-school connection unfolded, I knew that I wanted to focus on kindergarten students' writings. I began taking extensive field notes during in-class journal time as well as sharing time. As I reviewed samples of student writing and raw notes of conversations with parents, I focused on three emerging categories: teacher-student interactions during writing time, learning to write, and home connections to lessons.

At the same time, I began to make journal observations and found myself listening more acutely to what was being said by both students and parents. I specifically recall a day when the children were sharing detailed stories ranging from shopping for Christmas trees to naming their favorite teddy bears.
Kyl said, “When I got the Christmas tree, my mother made a gingerbread man to put on it, and it felled and it broke.”

Anna stated, “My teddy bear’s name is Luka, but in Albanian it means ‘star.’ Rainy comes up to play with me every night.” I asked her who Rainy was and she went on, “He’s my friend, and he’s eleven, and we play tag.”

Anna also told us that Rainy was Albanian. When I asked the children what kinds of stories we were sharing, Anna said “home stories.”

I needed to tap into this rich home connection. “What happens when I incorporate a home journal plan with my kindergarten students?” became my focus of inquiry. Home journals would provide an opportunity to welcome parents into the classroom and to extend the classroom boundaries into the home. So, I sent a note home in January announcing that a home journal plan would be starting and asking that children write at least three times a week with a parent or other family member and return the journals to school each Thursday.

Immediately, my dialogue with parents each morning and afternoon focused on home journal time with the children. Although parents expressed a keen interest in the journal, some wanted to know how to start; others were experiencing difficulties motivating the children to write. From our talks, I developed a subset of questions pertaining to choices of topic, strategies, and wonders about what kinds of information would come my way from parents. In pursuing answers to these questions, I interviewed a colleague who taught first grade, asking about her strategies for getting student writing.

“I’m not looking for perfection,” she responded, “but bravery, and a little bit of courage. Bravery, in the sense that they dare to put that pencil onto the paper and do their best to use their letters to represent sounds that they hear.” Those words stayed with me every time parents expressed concerns about how to work with their children.

**What Happened When Ms. M. Began Writing with Sean**

Ms. M. is a working mom. Although she arrives with Sean at least twenty minutes late each morning (because she has to rely on a bus to get to work), she maintains a constant routine. She helps Sean hang up his coat and put his lunch on the bookcase. Then, after giving him hugs and kisses, she waits for me to direct him to a particular activity before leaving. Once Sean has found a comfortable spot in the classroom, she chats with me about his journal time or whatever else may have gone on in the family the night before. Sean is an only child in a two-parent family; a new baby is due in June.

Sean started his journal the weekend before the official start time. He has thirty-nine entries in one journal, and Ms. M. keeps a journal at home for the times I have his journal at school. Of the thirty-nine entries, sixteen are Sean’s responses to stories read by his mom. He has written thirteen stories pertaining to extended family activities and ten creative stories of which one story about chores was directly related to a lesson on helping families. Five are, in his words “scary stories.”

Sean’s first journal entry, dated by mom on January 10, 1999, reads:

MY COUSIN JESSE CAME HOME
YESTERDAY: HE HAD AN
OPERATION ON HIS HEART AN I
BOUGHT HIM A LITTLE MUSICAL
ERNIE.

Ms. M. writes, “Jesse was in the hospital for heart surgery and when he came home Sean brought him a musical Ernie-doll so he will feel better.”

Ms. M. approached the home journal plan by helping Sean with spelling when he wrote. There is no evidence of inventive spelling in his home journal. In school, Sean will use inventive spelling but prefers to spell the word correctly. He takes full advantage of our classroom word-wall. When he started in-class writing in November, Sean needed reminders to write from left to right. Evidently, this was reinforced at home; all journal entries are written from left to right. Observing Sean write in class, I noted that he makes his own margins, and it comes quite naturally now.

In early March, I asked Sean who helped him and what he liked about writing at home. Sean responded, “It’s fun when I get to write the date on top. My mom and dad and uncle Frank and auntie Beth help me. My cousin Mike helps me when he is doing his homework; sometimes he helps me spell things I want to spell. I like it when my mom reads me a story at night. I write it and sometimes make up stories.”

A week later, I asked Ms. M. if she would share her thoughts of journal time with Sean. She responded in Sean’s journal with the following entry:

When writing with Sean, I let him make the decision on what to write about in journal. He enjoys making up a lot of stories. He also writes about books we read together and special days for him. He tells me what he wants to write and asks me how to spell the words. Sometimes he copies the words right from the book. I feel he has benefited from doing a journal
Write from the Start

because he is spelling a lot of words on
his own, by writing them over again.
He likes to work independently and
gets mad at himself if he makes a
mistake. His favorite part of the
journal is writing the date and
everyday that has a "th" in it.

In the middle of March, Ms. M.
commented that while she was
correcting Sean about the fact
that he wrote a letter backward,
said, "The teacher says it's
okay just to write myself." I could see Sean
was beginning to assert some indepen-
dence over his home journal. By the end of
that month, there was even more individu-
ality to his writing, as he had started
writing "The End" at the end of his stories
during in-class writing. Sean's home journal
entry on April 14, 1999, reads:

**thERE ONCE WAS A PIG**
**thE PIG SLEPT WHILE thE OtHEr**
P**IGS EATING BREAKFAST The**
**piG SLEPT WHILE thE**
**OtHer PIGS ATE LUNCH thE**
P**IG WAS STILL SLEEPING**
**When thE OtHer PIGS WERE**
**EATING SUPPER the END**

Ms. M. writes: "Sean wrote about a lazy pig
who slept the whole day while the other pigs
ate their breakfast."

This is Sean's in-class writing dated
November 18, 1998:

**PEGISPEAT**
**thEFarmerDBEB**
**Fat Mt rs PEGIS**

Sean explained, "Mrs. R., this says 'Pig is fat.
The farmer has a big fat pig.'"

Sean's in-class writing dated April 27, 1999,
reads:

**ThERE ONCE A CAT**
**thE cat went to the**
**CAT house AND AFTR**
**he WAS FimmShe WENT**
**to Get FOD thE END**

The journal plan provides the children with the
opportunity to have writing skills reinforced at
home, in a loving and encouraging manner.

Sean is currently writing stories with a
beginning and ending. He still maintains
accurate spelling at home, and it is evident
that he has spelling skills beyond those
expected of kindergarten students. I
support Ms. M. in her findings that he has
developed on a consistent basis. The fact
that he names so many family members
when describing journal time lends
credence to the importance of the
home-school connection for Sean.

Recently, Sean had to have minor surgery
on his hand. Ms. M. told me that as they
were wheeling Sean into the operating
room, he said, "Well, I won't be able to write
in my journal because I'm right-handed." To
this he added, "I know they're making cards
for me at school." Apparently, although he
knew he was unable to write in his journal,
Sean was confident that his classmates
would communicate with him through
cards. It appears Sean has discovered the
importance of communicating through
writing.

**What Happened When**
**Ms. K. Began Writing with Anna**

Every morning, Ms. K., a single working
mother of two, talks to me about Anna, the
stress of being a single parent, and trying to
manage child care arrangements. Despite
Mrs. K's concerns, Anna is creative,
cheerful, and was one of my first indepen-
dent writers.

At the beginning of the journal plan, Ms. K.
told me Anna wouldn't write for her at
home. For her first journal entry on January 9, 1999, Anna
told her mom a story. Ms. K.
transcribed the story (below)
using correct lettering and
punctuation, but Anna copied
only one comma and used the
lettering she preferred. She also
left out the ending "mom and I
did arts and crafts."

*I went to the store
with my mother AND I
Had fuN, But wHeN We CAME hoMe
I got sHtck FROM the CAR RiDe
LaTeR thAt AfteRNoOn I feLt
BeTTer AND PlAyED wITH
My..."

During the following week, Ms. K. had
difficulty motivating Anna to write. When
Anna did not pass in her journal that
second Thursday, I wrote a note to Ms. K.
listing specific words that Anna knew. The
next morning's journal came in with the
words copied. During morning share time, I
mentioned to Anna that her mother didn't
have to write the story for her. She could do
it herself, the way she did in school.

Anna responded, "I was trying to tell her
that, but every time she was busy. I like to
do it in sentences. I mean I like to write
words that I know and draw pictures of
them after."

Since late January, Anna has written mainly
word lists and factual sentences in her
journal. She does most of her creative
writing during in-class writing time. In
March, after a day spent with a friend
whose father worked at a veterinarian's
office, Anna’s journal contained a few entries about animals. Anna spelled the animal names, and Ms. K. helped with the unfamiliar spelling. When I asked Anna about her journal writing, she said, “I’ve been writing about my cousins and animals. I write about cats. I’m learning about animals because my friends’ dad works at the veterinarians, and he was teaching us all about animals.”

Anna discussed the benefits of writing at home and in school. “My mom helps me a lot and says I could write the words that I want to. Well, in school, I like to do it a lot. You help us. It helps me to learn to read.”

In April, Anna made two separate entries in her home journal. One read:

*My caT Had two Babies the caT Ate LEttuce My House is Yellow*

On April 27, 1999, this in-class writing was an extension of a poetry lesson. One of the poems was “Sing a Song of People” by Lois Lensky:

*Sing sing soNg [To this, Anna added a picture of two girls holding hands.]*

**Parental Involvement and the “Visiting Writers’ Club”**

Despite great efforts, some parents were not able to consistently participate in their children’s journal writing. I needed another approach to embrace these families and was inspired after reading an article about a teacher who had a series of workshops for kindergartners and their parents. I talked to the families about the possibility of having a parent-child writing workshop and, after receiving positive feedback, got the principal’s approval.

The children decided what we should call the workshop, who we should invite, and what we should have for a snack. Names varied, but the class finally agreed with Anna, who started with the “Writing Visitors Club” and changed it to the “Visiting Writers’ Club.” All parents and extended family members were invited. Parents sat with the children and for forty-five minutes talked, shared stories, and wrote. I distributed a survey and journal for the parents to complete.

Mrs. P. wrote, “I found the “Visiting Writers’ Club” interesting. I love to do things with my daughter like reading and coloring pictures. I feel that she is benefiting from the different written exercises you have done with her. I think she has learned so much this year. I wish there were more teachers like you.”

From Ms. R.: “It helps us to understand what you are teaching, so we can assist at home.”

I observed that parents want to be in their children’s “territory” and were interested in scheduling another workshop.

**April 29:**

**“Third Visiting Writers’ Club”**

This event was best attended. The luncheon provided time for parents and children to talk. Afterward, I handed out an informal survey that read: “Please share a few comments on what you have seen happening in terms of writing and reading with your child, since the journal plan began. This can relate to the home journal or writing club.”

Ms. K. responded “Well, I think it’s a great idea. But, I have a hard time getting Anna to write. Once I do get her to write she loves it! I have seen a big change with her capabilities to spell and write and she becomes excited when I acknowledge her good work.”

**The Benefit of Teacher, Parent, and Child Involvement**

The journal plan is a success because it is a part of the weekly routine of family life for many of my students. It provides the children with the opportunity to have writing skills reinforced at home, in a loving and encouraging manner. They have benefited from the consistency of writing daily within the classroom, and they now understand the value of cooperation and encouragement within their writing groups.

The home journal plan, along with the “Visiting Writers’ Club,” is a beginning they will take with them to first grade. The club helped us to build on real home-school connections. We all needed each other to make it work.

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This article, printed here with permission, was originally published in the Boston Writing Project’s Newsletter XVIII (2 and 3).