Stories Out of School: First-Grade Family Journals

by

Stephanie Terry

I am a parent and a teacher, and like others in this position, I have learned much about teaching from my child's teachers. In fact it was an experience with my daughter's teacher that converted me to the concept of the family journal.

I remember my excitement several years ago when Dhalya's teacher-tutor and I began to share a journal. Each day I'd read with interest not only the recap of the assignments they had completed but also the special notes and reflections that helped me feel good about sharing in my child's work day. This simple act of writing each day with a teacher who worked daily with my child was invigorating. I could identify immediately with her as a teacher "talking" to another teacher. But I was also a parent "talking" to my child's teacher.

Nancy Moore: Jan. 10

... For Monday I'd like Dhalya to write a story on "A Walk." Please help her think of an interesting walk (perhaps one the two of you have taken) inside or out, including things seen and what she did.

My reply: Jan. 16

... We talked about our walks together and found a book on the Listening Walk.

NM: Jan. 16

... For tonight, please have her think out her story on "A Walk."

NM: Jan. 17

... We began "The Walk" story and will finish tomorrow.

ST: Jan. 17

We talked and wrote a story "Going For A Walk." She read it well and was pleased.

NM: Jan. 18

... I was glad you were able to communicate to Dhalya your real knowledge of her worth and beauty. Believe me it shows. For instance look at the really clever comparison Dhalya made in the walk story. I helped her report her ideas slowly and helped her sound out many of the words but all the imagination (as well as the good sentence structure) are all in her oral language now. I was really pleased.

I began to wonder about my own first grade students and their parents. Using family journals, could we create the same kind of rapport as I had developed.
with Dahlya's teacher? My students are all African American, and several come from low-income, single-parent homes. I wondered what I could learn about my students by corresponding with their families. What could parents learn? And what would be the problems — and the benefits? After four years of writing with families, I feel I now have some answers.

Learning from Parents

Family journals offered parents the opportunity to share with me their concerns and expectations. Of course, some parent responses were brief and not particularly revealing; however, many parents wrote long, detailed letters. I was reminded that outside of school, parents and children lead complicated lives.

My name is Jennifer Lee. I am Jamellah’s mother. It’s about 11:30 p.m. and I am just getting in from my part-time job. I am very tired. I have to unwind a little, then check Jamellah’s homework, then help her get herself together for school in the morning. Right after this I will get something to eat, take my shower and get into bed. In the morning, I will be at work by six o’clock. I get off by 3 p.m. in the evening. When I come home I check Jamellah’s homework and sign it. Jamellah and I will drive down to her grandmother’s to do an errand for her. We will then come home, eat our dinner, take our shower and get in our bed. So we will be rested for work and school in the morning.

Jennifer Lee
11-17-93

I often saw another side of children that was not apparent in the classroom.

Shamira’s first two weeks of school was very exciting. She could hardly sleep the first day of school and the day before school Shamira asked about 20 times what was she going to wear. She had took out all of her clothes that she was to wear for the first day. She even took out her book bag and notebook and pencil, everything was just in place so she could be very prepared, she did not miss a thing. I felt very happy for her so I often encourage her toward her educational goals. As time went on, she didn’t show as much excitement as she did the first three days of school. She seem to me that she just started to lose interest in getting prepared for school. Sometimes she would whine and complain as if something was troubling her at school.

She also did not want to do homework. Sometimes if I let her go out and play she would come in afterwards and clean up and eat and fall asleep on the sofa as if she was so tired. So I would make her do homework before she went out to play and it would take her so long to complete it that she wouldn’t have time to go out and play with her friend. This made Shamira very sad so she became very rebellious.

She started yelling at the least thing that happened in the household, she wrote on everything the walls, etc. She cut holes in the sheets on the beds. I had to hide the scissors because she would cut anything in sight. Boy, with temper tantrums and crying seizures it kept me in a very stressful situation. I became very tired at the least thing I had to do.

Being I am a single parent mother of four children, I have got to find time for the other three children ages 17, 15, 13, which is a relief they are older and can give me a hand with her sometimes. But there are times that they also give up with Shamira’s rebellious attitude.

I truly believe this phase in her life will soon fade away. With God’s blessing and mercy and my prayer’s, she will adapt to this new experience of being more independent (as far as reading and writing, counting, etc.) and doing on her own the skills she is being taught at home and in school. As far as other activities and events, she and I usually go to church, sometimes movies very seldom though. We take long walks and shop together, visit relatives. These are things she loves to do. She loves to watch Pippi Longstockings tapes. Her favorite movie is “Look Who’s Talking 1.”

Mrs. Green
10-16-91

Parents not only alerted me to what was happening at home, but also to what was going on at school. Garry’s family journal shares the unfortunate experiences of being teased by students from other classes. Garry was born with a degenerative hip disorder which resulted in stunted growth. Garry’s mother wrote:

I wish you knew that other kids have been calling Garry names because he is short. So that makes Garry feel so bad that he doesn’t even want to come to school most days because he thinks that they will tease him again.

Mrs. Helen Murphy
1-9-94
As a result of these letters, I was more attentive to the special needs of each child. But parents also told me about their children’s talents and progress:

Dear Mrs. Terry,

In the last 2 1/2 months since my son Kenneth has been in your class he has changed drastically. In kindergarten, Kenneth did very little classroom participation. Whenever his teacher would call on him, he would shy away. Kenneth is a twin to his big brother Keith. He has a little brother, Denis, his mother and grandmother. We lived with his father up until the age of four. Kenneth is a shy tempered child who is also very smart. He loves to read and write and spell. With the help of his family, he can go a long way. Kenneth has not decided what he wants to become in life.

Sometimes he says he wants to play baseball, football, be a preacher or a police officer. Kenneth is more of a follower than a leader. I often tell him to be independent not dependent.

Ms. Darlene Julius
11-16-93

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Responding to Parents
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The first two weeks of school have been very frustrating for me. If I could only figure out a way to have Shaneika do her homework neatly, my frustrations will be over. I truly appreciate as well as admire the eagerness Shaneika has in wanting to do her assignments alone. Only because it’s the beginning of the year, I cannot lose my sanity. I have the faith to believe that this problem is well on its way to being resolved.

Mary George
September 16, 1992

I wrote back:

... It’s really hard when you’re little and you want to do things “All By Myself.” Please don’t give up.

Allow her to work a little bit on her own first, perhaps on a piece of practice paper and then on the homework assignment sheet next. Try this and see how this works.

Sometimes a parent’s special concern would be embedded in the text of a longer letter.

I am really satisfied with my son’s progress in school so far. I am proud to say that now there are some books he can read from beginning to end and his math has really improved. There are more things that seem to interest him now than before school began. I also see that my son is more interested in animals, their habitats, and how they live due to animals in the classroom. I like that also. I am having only one real concern about my son’s work and that is at times he writes backwards. Sometimes it’s just letters and then at times its entire words. Its only sometimes but it still bothers me. My son is really enjoying school and I don’t think it’s because he’s around children, a lot of his enjoyment is from the way he learns. He’s not bored with school or learning, and he really likes his teacher. I think that the only way a child can learn is if the teacher shows that she’s really concerned with the children and what goes on in the class and from what I see you do and I want to Thank You.

Vivian Brunson (Jerold’s Mom)
October 29, 1992

I responded:

Jerold is a delight. He’s quick to share and demonstrates that he knows lots of “great things.” I shall continue to work very hard to make sure he is ready for all levels of work. On writing backwards . . . sometimes this happens with first graders. Usually it’s nothing to be alarmed about, however, I will monitor this in class. If we see it hindering his work, then I shall make some inquiries here at school about “taking a closer” look. Please continue to be involved in Jerold’s learning. He really loves school and wants to learn.

However, writing to parents was not only an opportunity to respond to concerns. A special bonus of the family journal was the chance to tell parents about my observations of their child’s progress, as in my response to Candido’s mother. Candido’s mother wrote:

On the first week of school it was a big experience for Candido and me because he really enjoyed himself.
Candido said the teacher is nice and the class is much longer. He got to meet new children and parents. On the second week, things got a little better because he got more adjusted. I really enjoyed the first and second week because he has homework everyday and it helps him to learn how to read and do math. I want to thank you very much.

Love You, God Bless You
Rose Brown

Dear Mrs. Brown,

Candido adds so much to our classroom. He is a good thinker and is developing into a fine writer. It's really nice to see him stretching his letters and sounds out to write new words and ideas in his journal. We loved having "Audra Blue" [Candido's pet parakeet] in our class and can't wait for her next visit. Candido is learning to be quite a naturalist. I'm so glad that both of you are feeling comfortable about moving into first grade. Thanks for all of your help. Please use the journal to "talk" whenever you like.

Benefits and Problems of the Family Journal
As these examples make clear, parent and family journals make possible a rich dialogue which may be used to bring authentic change to individual student programs. Parents and family members who wrote liked the idea of communicating with their child's teacher on issues other than behavior. I found that the level of trust continued to rise when we wrote together. Some of the barriers that are often erected between home and school were erased. Finally, the students enjoyed seeing their parents write in journals just as they did in class. It was now the students who calmed the "fears" of the parents with comforting words to let them know how journal writing did not have to be perfect writing. It was "ok" not to spell each word correctly and Ms. Terry would not use her red pencil to cross out their writing. She would respect their work too.

For me, these benefits outweigh the one major problem inherent in these exchanges: they require lots of time. During the years I used these journals, I was communicating with thirty or more families. Each journal required my "personal" attention; generic impersonal snippets would not do. I found that my all-too-optimistic time table of sending the journals home one week and responding the following week was impossible to maintain. A more reasonable time frame of journal writing with parent and family members two or three times a year proved to be more successful.

But because I was willing to put in the time, parents became more confident in their communication with me, and a few began writing to the entire class, providing us with an extra gift. At our graduation ceremony, as children advanced from first to second grade, we shared a poem written by Michael's mother, Theresa Holmes:

A Beautiful Black Bird

I can see you ... you're there
Black as black can be, but you're shining,
Forming and creating new generations.

It may seem like you're flying high in the sky like a bird with no wings now.

But it is about to change.
You will shine and continue to shine even when it begins to rain.

Oh you beautiful black bird,
You mustn't get discouraged over trivial things.

Just continue to fly high in the sky as far as your wings can take you.

Now, go my little black bird fly, fly away.

I like to think that the effort that the parents and I put into these journals helped not only the children but entire families fly higher and further.

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Correction: Connie Broderick's article, "How Do You Spell Caught?" which appeared in the Fall 1995 issue of The Quarterly, was reprinted from Reflections on Teaching Writing II: Voices of Change from Pennsylvania's Writing Projects, published in 1994 by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.