

2017

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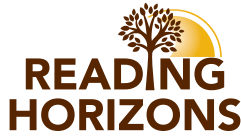
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### Recommended Citation

DeFauw, D. L. (2017). Writing with Parents in Response to Picture Book Read Alouds. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 56 (2). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol56/iss2/3](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol56/iss2/3)

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## Writing with Parents in Response to Picture Book Read-Alouds

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### Abstract

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High-quality writing instruction needs to permeate elementary students' in- and outside-of-school experiences. The aim of this research was to explore how teaching writing to parents may support home-school literacy connections. This qualitative case study explored parents' experiences in interactive writing sessions. The descriptive coding and constant comparative analysis of transcribed parent writing sessions, field notes, and documents revealed three themes: (1) Writing Tips and Strategies, (2) Parent-Writers, and (3) Story Connections. The parent writing sessions facilitated parents' understanding of how to support their elementary-age children's writing development. Parents demonstrated a desire to support their children's writing development, and they needed strategies to understand how to help. Parents applied suggestions as writers to support their children's writing development at home. Collaborating with the children's parents helped increase the likelihood the writing strategies gleaned from the writing clinic would be used within the children's homes.

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**KEYWORDS:** family literacy, parent-writers, writing, picture books

*Dear Child,*

*Every moment of life you experience is precious. I get lost in thought thinking about the past. I know you notice because I stare at you sometimes and you ask me why I do it. I always tell you.*

A mother wrote this letter to her daughter in response to Karen Kingsbury's *Let Me Hold You Longer* during a parent writing session provided through a university-sponsored writing clinic. While her third-grade daughter received tutoring support from a preservice teacher, the mother participated in a parent writing session focused on reading aloud and writing in response to children's picture books.

Few empirical research studies have explored parents' support of their elementary children's writing development aside from emergent writing skills (e.g., Neumann, Hood, & Ford, 2012; Robins & Treiman, 2009). Although those studies explore building home-school connections to support children's literacy development, the focus is primarily on reading (e.g., Barone, 2011; Harper, Platt, & Pelletier, 2011; Niklas & Schneider, 2015; Sénéchal & Young, 2008).

This qualitative research study was designed to explore interactive parent writing sessions. As parents had to transport their children to the writing clinic to receive free tutoring, I seized the opportunity to provide parents strategies to support the home-school literacy connection (Fleischer & Pavlock, 2012). Through the parent writing sessions, parents learned to read like writers (Smith, 1983) and write like published authors through quick-write strategies (Rief, 2002).

The purpose of this intrinsic case study (Stake, 2005) was to explore the following question: How will parents respond to writing tasks in response to picture book read-alouds to support their children's writing development? Through triangulated data collected from parent writing session participants—2 grandmothers and 14 mothers—I studied how parent writing sessions may support home-school connections. This article also provides the curricular design of the parent writing sessions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which focuses on how learners acquire deeper understanding through observation first and then through experience, provides a fundamental theoretical basis for exploring the parents' writing experiences. Modeling is a key component to effective writing instruction.

Through my modeling and encouragement, parents developed self-efficacy, which is an individual's perception of oneself as capable in participating in an activity (Pajares & Valiante, 2006). Parents needed to be prompted to attempt writing following my modeling. They also needed encouragement to participate in partnerships and whole group activities. Bandura (1993) argues that individuals need to participate in social, academic, and physiological experiences for their self-efficacies to develop.

Without experiencing the writing tasks, parents are unlikely to transfer writing to home contexts. Parents' modeling of writing and prompting for children is needed to support children's writing development. The home-school literacy connection is strengthened when parents join the collaboration to support their children's literacy development (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). Epstein's (1995) framework for improving the school-family-community partnership includes parenting, learning at home, communicating, collaborating with community, decision making, and volunteering; each involvement includes myriad practices that schools, parents, and communities may use to support student achievement.

Writing is a practice parents may use to make connections, support their children's writing development, and strengthen family bonds (del Rosario Barillas, 2000; Fleischer & Pavlock, 2012). Parents are unlikely to write, however, if their self-efficacies have not developed (Pajares & Valiante, 2006). Parents often want to help but do not know how or do not feel confident in their abilities to help. Collaborating with educators and other parents can provide the experiences they need to be empowered to support the home-school literacy connection.

### **Background**

High-quality writing instruction needs to permeate elementary students' in- and outside-of-school experiences. Research is needed to explore parents' crucial role in supporting their elementary children's writing development at home. Current research highlights parents' experiences with (a) informational sessions to support home-to-school writing partnerships (Fleischer & Pavlock, 2012; Rasinski & Padak, 2009), (b) prompted writing tasks (del Rosario Barillas, 2000), (c) family dialogue journals (Allen et al., 2015), and (d) family writing projects (Bolling, 2004; Kelly, 2004; McKinney, Lasley, & Holmes-Gull, 2008).

## **Home-School Informational Partnerships**

Many programs exist to encourage families to support their children's literacy development. Such programs support the home-school connection, encouraging families to read, write, and talk with their children (Rasinski & Padak, 2009). Such homework can have a positive impact on student learning. Through their meta-analysis, Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) found that parents' abilities to facilitate their children's homework completion increased when homework rules were set and parents were provided training. Thus, parents may set at-home writing requirements to increase their children's writing practice. Additionally, ensuring parents understand strategies used in the school setting will empower them to provide support. As Patall et al. (2008) argue, "inadequate helping skills and use of instructional strategies that conflict with those the teacher uses in class might attenuate the relationship between parent involvement in homework and achievement" (p. 1091).

Families of early elementary students need support with learning how to develop children's reading and writing skills. Twice a month, Ortega and Ramirez (2002) provided informational and interactive sessions for families of first- and second-grade children. Sessions began with a 10-minute focus lesson, 15-minute application, and 5-minute sharing. Topics encompassed facilitating children's emergent reading and writing skills, with a strong focus on phonological awareness. Library visits were encouraged and an end-of-the-school-year celebration was held with local storytellers. Similarly, Maloy and Edwards (1990) provided three informational sessions focused on inventive spelling and writing stages for parents of kindergarten and first-grade students. The children received writing boxes with materials to support their writing and illustrating at home. A dozen families participated and varied in the writing support they offered at home, with only four families consistently requiring their children to write.

Even families of preteens and teenagers need engagement opportunities to support their children's academic development as they transition to high school and college (Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, & Fonseca, 2015); yet, little research highlights writing-focused sessions for secondary students. Fleischer and Pavlock (2012) provided parents of teenagers writing informational sessions. Some sessions provided parents with research-based writing strategies to support their teenagers' post-secondary writing requirements. One session's task invited parents to record their personal, positive literacy moments, which parents discovered occurred primarily outside of school; thus, they contemplated creating such positive literacy experiences at home for their teenagers. Strategies were provided to encourage families to write at home for authentic purposes to build family bonds through letter writing or creating family keepsakes.

## **Prompted Writing Tasks**

Other teachers have invited parents to complete writing tasks through provided writing prompts. McClay, Peterson, and Nixon (2012) interviewed 216 Canadian teachers concerning parent involvement in writing instruction, wherein "75% reported that the support of parents influenced their teaching of writing" (p. 46). Elementary teachers also have found writing prompts beneficial for supporting family writing opportunities. Chihak (1999) reported a successful publication project designed to publish students' writing; parents of published elementary authors wrote brief biographies about their children to include in the publication. Writing about their own children provided parents an authentic opportunity for writing. The final publications also created a keepsake for the families to treasure.

To support other writing ventures, Jennings and O’Keefe (2002) found that second-grade children and their parents explored social justice topics as they wrote to one another at home to explore “historical inquiry that emphasize[d] how history is affective, personal, dynamic, and transforming” (p. 411). Similarly, Chin (1996) prompted families of fourth-grade children to explore not only family traditions, but also memories of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. Such writing allows for rich conversation and a plethora of teachable moments for families to build upon.

Other teachers have reported their use of writing prompts for families. One fourth-grade teacher asked parents of reluctant writers to complete at-home writing tasks such as summaries of television shows or quick writes about personal experiences (McClay et al., 2012). Chin (1996) invited parents to write an essay based on the prompt “Everyone knows what it means to be a parent of a fourth grader.” Due to parent enthusiasm, the next writing assignment invited parents of the Student of the Week to share stories of the student via written or oral language. Also, Ortega and Ramirez (2002) encouraged first- and second-grade children to write with their families using mentor text; families wrote a page similar to an ABC book they read aloud. Participants chose a letter and, using alliteration, wrote a page to add to the book.

Middle school and secondary teachers also provide writing prompts to students’ families. del Rosario Barillas (2000) provided sixth graders writing prompts to complete along with their parents to meet homework writing requirements; writing and drawing were welcomed in the responses, some of which were included in journals. Similarly, Ciotti (2001) invited parents to write in response to their ninth-grade children’s prompted assignments. She found that parents experienced the same writing struggles their children experienced as they wrote an essay based on the prompt “Everyone knows what it’s like to be a ninth grader.” Parents also responded to their children’s writing in template journals that focused on four scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*.

### **Family Dialogue Journals**

Family dialogue journals (FDJs) are one writing strategy proven useful in supporting home-school partnerships. Allen et al. (2015) highlighted FDJs implemented with children in grades K-3, 6-8, 10, and 12 “to connect what...students learned at school and at home” (p. 18). Parents were invited to participate in two-way communication through various means such as journaling, questioning, or responding to prompts.

Elementary teachers have used FDJs to support the home-school literacy connection (Kay, Neher, & Lush, 2010; Morningstar, 1999). Rowe and Fain (2013) encouraged families to respond to bilingual books through a family backpack project; parents’ and children’s family journal entries included written and illustrated open-ended responses.

Although not identified as FDJs, Jennings and O’Keefe (2002) encouraged second graders and their parents to write conversations in response to readings focused on social justice. As the teacher, O’Keefe invited families to respond to an article about the civil rights movement and a fictionalized letter from a Japanese American in an internment camp to a friend. O’Keefe (2001) also asked families to have written conversations in response to children’s books and other texts for homework. The focus remained on supporting students’ reading comprehension development, but writing improvement was certainly a goal.

### **Family Writing Projects**

Kelly (2004) created the Southern Nevada Writing Project’s first family writing

project. An English teacher in Las Vegas, he invited his sixth-grade students to join about a half dozen Saturday sessions with their families. Each 2-hour session included writing and sharing. Writing activities included reflections and stories based on artifacts families brought in to illustrate their personalities, photographs families took of their community, maps parents created of their childhood neighborhoods, and maps children created of their current neighborhoods. Families built a community of writers.

Similarly, Bolling (2004) led a family writing project for fifth graders and their families. Families wrote together, responded to artifacts, detailed maps of childhood communities, and wrote letters to one another or themselves to open in a decade. Also, Biggs (2001) advertised one-night workshops for her high school students and their families. Participants listed memories across decades of their lives to discover content to explore during the next 20-minute freewrite. Families shared with one another and ended the session with writing a letter to their family member.

Although not identified as a family writing project, Akroyd (1995), an elementary school principal, met with 15 families for 10 weeks after school to draft and revise a final product for parents to give to their children (e.g., a memory book or journal). Parents created a writing community, wrote for 20 minutes, conferenced with fellow parent-writers, and shared their stories. Similarly, through their Stories to Our Children program, Rosado, Amaro-Jiménez, and Kieffer (2015) encouraged parents to write books for their children, birth to six years old. Over the course of five sessions, 68 parents wrote their children's first book. They celebrated with author Pat Mora, who presented the published anthology.

## **Method**

### **Context, Participants, Procedures**

During the second half of the Winter 2013 and Fall 2014 semesters, the writing clinic was offered at a university for six weeks and an urban elementary school for five weeks, respectively. I partnered with the same Title I elementary school both semesters. During the Winter 2013 semester, the principal and third-grade teachers identified 15 families to participate. Eight families (six African American, one Mexican American, one European American) brought their children to the university to receive tutoring from three preservice and two in-service teachers enrolled in the writing methodology course. During the Fall 2014 semester, all families of nearly 120 third-grade students were invited to participate. Fifteen families (eleven African American, two Mexican American, two European American) brought their children to the elementary school to receive tutoring from 21 preservice and 4 in-service teachers enrolled in the course.

This case study included 14 mothers and 2 grandmothers who chose to attend one or more interactive parent writing sessions during either semester. Twelve participants were African American, three were European American, and one was Mexican American. These participants provided a complete target population sample (Patton, 2015) as well as a convenience sample. Although convenience sampling lacks credibility (Merriam, 1998), Stake (2005) discussed how within bounded intrinsic cases, researchers “receive their cases; they seldom choose them” (p. 450). Thus, selection criteria included any participant who chose to participate in one or more of the parent writing sessions and to consent to the research study.

**Parent writing session design.** Rich with conversation, each parent writing session consisted of (1) picture book read-alouds, (2) modeled writing, (3) time to write, (4) time to share, and (5) encouragement for transferring strategies to home contexts (see

Table 1). I modeled writing for two to three minutes. After my modeling, parents wrote for 5-15 minutes about their connections to the content of the read aloud. Discussion focused on parents sharing family stories with their children, especially to strengthen family bonds.

**Table 1**  
**Steps for Implementing Interactive Parent Writing Sessions**

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1. Schedule parent writing sessions. Ideally, seek families' topic suggestions.
2. Review reading excerpts (e.g., picture books, novels) to connect with parents.
3. Identify the writing task for each text.
4. Read aloud an excerpt to the parents.
5. Provide a prompt related to the read-aloud.
6. Model for parents how to respond to the prompt in 2- to 3-minute quick-writes.
7. Encourage families to write to the prompt for 5 to 15 minutes.
8. Continue to write as the parents write, perhaps adding to the modeled writing.
9. Invite volunteers to share their writing with a partner and then whole group.
10. Encourage parents to share their writing with their children.
11. Challenge parents to write at home with their children in response to the texts they read aloud.

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Each parent writing session included at least one read-aloud of a picture book with an inherent message adults would find humorous, meaningful, or poignant. Through modeling and discussion, I encouraged families to model fluent reading when they read aloud to their children at home (Trelease, 2006). Texts are sequential per my implementation experience (see Table 2).

**Parent writing session examples.** To detail the procedure further, the following describes the first, second, and fourth parent writing sessions from the Fall 2014 semester. Due to the first session's weather-related cancellation, the first parent writing session included two topics rather than one: Understanding the Writing Clinic and Connecting Reading and Writing. A discussion pursuant to the read-aloud, *Walk On! A Guide for Babies of All Ages*, by Marla Frazee, highlighted the challenges of learning anything new, including how to write. Meanwhile, for the read aloud of David Shannon's *Too Many Toys*, I modeled a 3-minute quick-write listing toys my children and I enjoyed. Parents wrote similar lists and shared them in small groups. Finally, I shared tips for looking at each listed toy as a potential narrative, explanatory, or informational topic. As an example, I suggested my daughter could write a narrative about receiving her favorite building Lego set, an explanatory piece concerning how to build with the Lego set, or an informational piece to explain the manufacturing history of the Lego company.

The second parent writing session also included two topics due to an election day cancellation: Learning to Write with Your Child and Discovering the Heart of Writing—Revision. The session began with a read-aloud, *Grandpa's Face*, by Eloise Greenfield, followed by a modeled writing to the prompt, "Write about someone you love." To encourage dialogue, or "talk walks" per the picture book's content, I modeled writing snippets of conversation with my daughters. Parents participated in a 5-minute quick-write and small-group discussion. To practice revision, I stated, "As I reread the first page of *Grandpa's Face*, think about the senses. How does Eloise Greenfield paint a scene for us we can see and hear?" Different parents shared the following details: (1) "the sturdy brown

**Table 2**  
**Recommended Family Read-Alouds, Writing Tasks, and Connections**

Text	Summary	Task	Connection
<i>Walk On! A Guide for Babies of All Ages</i> , by Marla Frazee	A baby experiences a “how-to” guide for learning to walk.	Families write memories of learning, or watching their children learn new tasks.	Discuss the similar supports children need learning to walk and write.
<i>Too Many Toys</i> , by David Shannon	Mom is shocked to find the donation box empty, but the boy needs the box.	Families record memories they have of playing with boxes or toys.	Highlight each toy as a potential narrative, informational, or explanatory topic.
<i>Grandpa’s Face</i> , by Eloise Greenfield	Tamika and Grandpa share a special bond, strengthened through “talk walks.”	Families write snippets of conversations they have had or need to have with their children.	Support families in choosing to talk more with their children about daily life.
<i>I Wanna Iguana</i> , by Karen Kaufman Orloff	Through personal letters, the son persuades Mom to permit a pet iguana.	Families write letters in a composition notebook to create a family keepsake.	Encourage families to keep a dialogue journal (Morningstar, 1999).
<i>I Wanna New Room</i> , by Karen Kaufman Orloff	Through letters to Dad, the son lobbies for his own room and invites his brother to join him.	Prompt families to write about sibling rivalry and love.	Help families detail the extraordinary in ordinary events between siblings.
<i>How to Be a Baby</i> , by Me, the Big Sister by Sally Lloyd-James	Big Sister highlights the drawbacks and benefits of being a baby.	Families write a nonfiction piece in response to a version of the title “How to Be a Kid, by Me, Your Parent.”	Support families in experiencing the challenges of revision as they peer-conference and rewrite.
<i>Roller Coaster</i> , by Marla Frazee	A girl conquers a fear of roller coaster rides.	Families write about their children’s first-time experiences.	Families write like the author, detailing a small moment.
<i>The Best Story</i> , by Eileen Spinelli	Per her family’s suggestions, a girl continues to revise her contest entry.	Families encourage their children to participate in writing contests.	Provide contest opportunities for children (DeFauw, 2013, 2015).
<i>The Stories That Bind Us</i> , by Bruce Feiler	Families need to tell their children their family narratives.	Families record their family stories.	Discuss how children connect to their families’ stories in order to face life’s challenges (Feiler, 2013).
<i>I Meant to Tell You</i> , by James Stevenson	A father shares memories of his daughter’s childhood.	Families write to the prompt, “I remember...”	Find narrative topics from the past.
<i>Let Me Hold You Longer</i> , by Karen Kingsbury	A mother details her son’s life from infancy to college.	Families record the “lasts” they remember.	Remind families to value every moment.

face,” (2) “his loud laughter,” and (3) “how his face changes.” I requested, “Please, reread what you’ve written. Add some sounds, what you would hear the person you love so much say, or what you would see.” Parents revised for 5 minutes, and I encouraged them to support their children’s revision practices.

The fourth parent writing session explored the topic Connecting Reading and Writing. The session began with a read-aloud of *Let Me Hold You Longer*, by Karen Kingsbury, followed by a modeled writing to the prompt, “Write a letter to your child or write a list of memories that stand out to you.” Parents participated in a 10-minute quick-write and small-group share. I encouraged families to share their writing with their children to reminisce about past events.



**Data Sources**

Triangulated data sources gathered from March to April 2013 and November to December 2014 included the following:

- field notes recorded following each parent writing session,
- transcribed audio recordings of each parent writing session,
- documents of parents’ and my written responses to the writing tasks, and
- documents of parents’ responses to open-ended questions completed at the beginning of each session to guide future topics and provide feedback on previous content and experiences.

**Data Analysis**

To inductively analyze (Patton, 2015) the data set, two overarching steps were followed. The first round of all data coding included descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013). I created Microsoft Word documents of transcribed parent writing session transcripts, field note journal entries, and documents. I reread all data numerous times, highlighting certain parts and inserting comments to describe my reflections concerning each piece of data. Next, I isolated each piece of coded data by attaching the data to index cards. Using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I sorted the data on the index cards. Three themes emerged through six prominent categories (see Table 3).

**Table 3**  
**Original Data Coding**

Category (No. of coded passages)	No. of subcategories	Category definition with top three subcategories (No. of coded passages)
Parent-writer (53)	2	Parents shared acquired (39) or previous (14) dispositions for writing.
Experiencing Writing (106)	6	Parents experienced the writing process through writing samples (35) written in response to prompts (31) they chose to share (17).
Bonding (49)	5	Parents provided one another with feedback (16) and discussed topics (13) through weekly conversations (11).
Oral Story Circle (73)	2	Parents built connections with one another (44) and shared personal experiences (29).
Support Needed (161)	11	Parents needed or requested support (55) to strengthen the home/school connection (43), especially related to spelling concerns (27).
Writing Instruction (415)	20	Parents were provided writing strategies (57) using mentor texts (33) and tips for motivating children’s writing development (36).

An outside researcher connected 15% of preselected categorical data to the following three themes to determine an inter-rater reliability of 92%:

- *Writing Tips and Strategies*: The participants were provided techniques to connect home and school contexts to support their children’s writing development: “I could really benefit on learning how to kind of incorporate her learning and me teaching her into my life.”
- *Parent-Writers*: The participants identified themselves as writers or demonstrated their writing abilities through responses to writing prompts and tasks: “I’m a writer, too.”
- *Story Connections*: The participants connected with one another through experiences. They shared needs for support and encouragement to confidently facilitate their children’s writing development and strengthen family bonds, which they learned to do through sharing experiences they reminisced about per the content of high-quality children’s picture books: “My child intimidates me. She’s a gifted writer. She’s independent and I want to be able to help her.”

## **Findings**

Through interactive parent writing sessions, parents needed to practice writing tips and strategies that were useful for supporting their children's writing development. Parents responded to the content of children's picture books through quick-writes to develop their own writing voices as parent-writers. Participation in a writing community strengthened friendships and family bonds as parent-writers connected their families' experiences with the picture books' and parent writing sessions' content.

### **Writing Tips and Strategies**

Writing tips and strategies were evident through the content of the interactive parent writing sessions. Parents wanted to learn how to improve their children's writing. For example, one parent wrote on a family questionnaire, "I'm hoping to learn tips on how to help improve her writing." To meet parents' needs, I provided such strategies as supporting students' idea generation, writing details, using free-writing and quick-writes, providing authentic purposes for writing, noticing and naming what published authors do in mentor texts (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007), and using dialogue journals to strengthen students' writing and family bonds (Allen et al., 2015). The following paragraphs detail three writing tips and strategies illustrative of the tools parents needed to support their children's writing development at home.

First, during the initial parent writing session in Winter 2013, I suggested the FDJs as a useful strategy to not only support students' writing development through authentic writing purposes, but to also strengthen family connections through letter writing. Every parent voluntarily took a writer's notebook. Later that semester, one parent, Shelly (participants' names are pseudonyms) shared with the group that she loved being able to write to her daughter because she could share thoughts she felt uncomfortable vocalizing. She also stated that her daughter wanted to write even more since beginning the dialogue journal. Many participants nodded in agreement but offered no other explicit examples of dialogue journal use.

Dialogue journals provided families an authentic writing tool to communicate with their children. Parents' initial interest in taking the dialogue journals home simply could have been due to wanting a notebook at home; yet, taking the resources home increased the chances the family members would fully participate in keeping dialogue journals. Certainly, Shelly modeled writing for an authentic purpose and audience. As the audience, her daughter felt motivated to respond to her mother's letters through the dialogue journal, thus writing for an authentic purpose and audience herself. This mother-daughter dyad utilized the tool to strengthen their relationship.

Second, a strategy I shared in response to parents' needs was to use sticky notes to support organizing information for a nonfiction report. I stated, "Have your kids write a couple ideas on sticky notes. Spread the notes out on the table or a window. They can reorganize their thoughts. When it comes to nonfiction writing, one of the trickiest parts is just getting organized." Parents needed concrete strategies to use at home. Writing is abstract, and parents struggled with understanding how to facilitate writing development aside from correcting spelling and grammar. This writing tip provided families a concrete tool for focusing on drafting and revision rather than only writing conventions.

Third, I modeled writing while using picture books as mentor texts during every parent writing session, as the following field note excerpt highlights:

"I'm going to have you write to your child about how to be a kid. The

book I have here is *How to be a Baby, by Me, the Big Sister*, by Sally Lloyd-James. While I'm reading this to you, I just want you to be thinking about making connections." Based on the conversation with the parents following the read-aloud, we created the following shared writing excerpt:

"How to be a kid. When you're a kid you have to do what your mother says even if you think I'm wrong or mean or stupid or anything. You have to do your chores and then be told how you did them wrong. You have to play quietly. When you're a kid you get to experience magic. You love the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, and the Tooth Fairy and they love you right back. When you're a kid you grow out of your clothes, even your favorite t-shirt with Sponge Bob. When you're a kid, you lose your teeth and no one bothers to tell you the rest of you won't fall off, too. When you're a kid you're told to stop running, stop jumping on the furniture, stop running in and out. Just stop! When you're a kid you're told everything in an extra loud voice. It is yelling, even though we rarely admit it."

The modeling I completed for parents to highlight strategies and tips they could transfer to their homes helped them experience writing instruction. Talking about using mentor texts and writing with their children was not as helpful as actually first experiencing such practice as a group. Through writing practice, parents grew as parent-writers.

### **Parent-Writers**

Participants practiced writing within the interactive parent writing sessions and strengthened their writing voices as parent-writers. Six out of 14 mothers identified themselves as writers per transcripts. For example, Sasha stated, "I love to write. I have always loved it. I just don't have as much time anymore." Chris stated, "I'm writing a book someday!" Regardless of whether or not parents identified themselves as parent-writers, I encouraged parents to write:

"I want you to write a little bit, too. For those of you who already write, you already get it due to your experience. For those of us who don't write or haven't written in awhile, it's sometimes easy to forget how challenging it is to get our thoughts down. I believe we learn best by first knowing what it's like to be a writer before we can teach others to write."

Parent-writers demonstrated their writing abilities through prompted responses. For example, following the shared writing about "how to be a kid," Shelly shared her writing, presented here as a field note excerpt:

"I'll do mine. It kind of don't make any sense. Alright. It's called 'Time to Learn to Have Fun.' When you are a kid there are so many rules. I think old people forget what it's like to have fun. Taking naps and eating yucky food. Hmmm, all I should be eating is candy and hot dog in a bun. I'm sorry you're little or are you sorry because you're big?...Then you get mad when I scream and cry.... You should relate because I know you hate when police man make you cry.... I don't even know where my mind at. I'm acting like I'm ten!"

I responded, "You know that line in there, 'Are you mad that I'm little or are you mad that I'm big?' That speaks a lot to me."

Shelly stated, "I think I'm mad that I'm big."

This excerpt details Shelly's first public response as a parent-writer. She took a risk to share her writing with the group. Her writing even surprised her as she realized her attempt at rhyme and self-discovery of content. Throughout the sessions, Shelly shared frustrations with helping her daughter, caring for her two older sons, and meeting her responsibilities as a daycare provider. Adult responsibilities taxed her time. Her voice echoed the voice of my own role as a parent and other parents within the group, which I highlighted through my response to her. Adult responsibilities often cause stress. Learning to have fun even as parents is necessary to enjoy the journey of parenthood, an inferred reflection from Shelly's writing. Parents would love to have more time to just play with their children, but parents' roles are different in the family dynamic, especially when there are extenuating circumstances requiring police intervention, as Shelly's writing reveals: "You should relate because I know you hate when police man make you cry." In this statement, her daughter's voice begs for understanding by connecting her own tears with her mother's tears.

In response to the same prompt, Gina and Katie wrote similarly to Shelly:

Gina: "You are not a baby. You are a kid now. Not a baby. You need to listen when spoken to. When you make a mess, you clean it up. You're not a baby anymore. It would be nice if you asked me, 'Do you need help?'"

Katie: "It's time to learn to make up my bed in the morning before I go to school so Mommy won't have to do it. It's time to learn to take my hot chocolate cup in the kitchen and put it in the sink so Mommy won't have to do it. When I get home from school, it's time for me to learn to hang up my coat instead of throwing it on the couch. Sometimes I miss. Oh well. Mommy's right behind me to pick it up."

Within this field note excerpt, these two parents highlighted rules they required their children to follow. Inherent in these rules, however, are parent-writers' voices asking for help with the day-to-day adult responsibilities of caring for children. Through writing and oral discourse, the group often discussed how parents, too often, do for their children what their children could do for themselves. Habits form and kids simply get used to their parents cleaning up any messes left behind. These parent-writers voiced and planned to share their writing with their children, per the following field note excerpt:

Following the sharing, I stated, "If you want to take your writing home, feel free. If you're just going to throw them away, and you don't mind if I keep them, I will keep them." Three mothers and one grandmother stated they planned to finish them. Katie stated, "I'm gonna finish this, type it up and put it up on her door! It will become her new motto!"

Parent-writers also responded to the prompt "Write about someone you love" after reading *Grandpa's Face*, by Eloise Greenfield. The following parent-writers' responses to this prompt detailed their affirmation for their own mothers:

Elizabeth: "She is tall. She is strong and sturdy. Her face is like mine but brown. I see a smart, independent, beautiful woman when I look into her eyes. To me, she is the most intelligent person in the world whether it's true or not. If she is proud then I feel as though my job is done. I hope I grow everyday to be more like her because she is queen."

Juanita: “I did write about my mother. My mother is a strong-willed type of woman. I’ve never seen her back down from anything. She has always been able to hold her own. My mother is a countrywoman from her head to her toes. She has taught me to never give up and hard work does get you somewhere in life.”

Through these field note excerpts, the parent-writers chose to write about their mothers, which I had not anticipated they would choose. Because *Grandpa’s Face* details a relationship between a grandfather and granddaughter, I anticipated the parent-writers would write about their own grandparents or their children interacting with grandparents. Instead, these mothers chose to honor their mothers. The parent-writers’ voices echo the love they have for these important women in their lives.

Finally, Karen Kingsbury’s book, *Let Me Hold You Longer*, supported parents in reminiscing about their children’s past experiences. The prompt included listing memories or writing a letter to their children. The following field note excerpt highlights not only two parent-writers’ responses to this prompt, but also one of these parent-writer’s choice to continue writing:

Sasha: “I kind of just wrote different little bullets of things that I remember about my son. He was a very brave little boy that liked to stomp on every bug he could find, but if one crawled on him he would scream and freak out.”

Birdie: “I was just listing things off. My daughter, as soon as she could speak words as proper as she could, she would say, ‘I quite like cake’ or ‘how lovely.’ She whispers amongst herself and her toys, playing out situations. I’d sneak in to see her and watch her and approach her in time.” Following the session, Birdie gave me the following excerpt, a piece she wrote while the group moved onto other discussion topics:

Dear Daughter,

That Little Mermaid sweater you’re wearing. That was mine once. I wore it to kindergarten too when it was cold. You know when you consintrate [sic] on a task, like drawing those spiders and snowmen, I’m thinking about when I drew my unicorns and sunsets. You should take the time to look at the world around you. If there are too many lights on at night, you might not see the stars and moon.

These parent-writers reflect the ultimate goal of these sessions: empower parents’ writing voices. Through encouragement and prompting, parents chose to write about family experiences or their feelings. Parents experienced the process of writing in response to children’s picture books, a task I encouraged them to implement at home to develop their voices and support their children’s writing development. Hopefully, parents shared their writing with their children, not only to model writing, but to help connect their hearts just as participants’ hearts seemed to connect through their shared stories.

### **Story Connections**

As parent-writers shared their writing and participated in conversations about picture books, they formed story connections with one another. They recognized their similar celebrations and struggles with group members and with the picture books’ content as they filled the parent writing sessions with a spectrum of emotion.

Following the read-aloud of David Shannon's *Too Many Toys*, families shared experiences with boxes. Carla said, "I turned one into a bus and one into a van. And one time we had the new refrigerator box when I was a kid and it was a cave, a car, a tent, and a castle." Gina stated, "My grandson, he just turned one....He found this box. So he's pushing it and he's sitting in it and we're pushing him. A good 40 minutes, he just played with that box." I stated, "My stepmom got a couple of new appliances....She put contact paper over them, decorated them, cut out little doors and windows....It's so cool. I don't even know why my children ever want to come home."

Parents also supported one another through their challenges. Shelly, in particular, self-reflected through interactions inherent in the parent writing sessions as the following field note excerpt illustrates:

During the initial session, Shelly stated, "My child intimidates me, and what I mean by that is she's, in my opinion, she's a gifted writer as far as with her expression. It's just like she can sit here and write a book and it will be like her grammar would be perfect and punctuation or whatever. She's independent and I want to fit more into her to being able to help her. It's just like she does her own work and I'm not as involved. I'm tired. I could really benefit on learning how to kind of incorporate her learning and me teaching her into my life."

Following the same session, Shelly and I spoke informally. Her daughter ran up to her, writer's notebook in hand, "Mama!"

Because Shelly was still speaking with me, she yelled, "Not now!"

I placed my hand on her daughter's shoulder while Shelly and I finished our conversation. I asked, "What did you want to say?"

"I wrote a piece about you, Mama!" she squealed and proceeded to read aloud a touching piece concerning her admiration for her mother.

Shelly's rough exterior softened as she looked at me, tears nudging the corners of her eyes. As her daughter raced away I said, "We almost missed that moment."

Shelly repeated a version of that phrase during a subsequent session. In response to our discussion related to Karen Kingsbury's *Let Me Hold You Longer*, Katie shared, "So as I'm holding the paper, she has my hand and she's rubbing so I'm like okay because when she was a baby and she, I don't know when it's going to end, but she likes to play with the nail bed, and I think that relaxes her or calms her. Because if she thinks I'm upset with her that's the first thing she does. She grabs my hand and she rubs it, and she goes up and down the nail bed. I don't say anything, because she's been doing it, so I'm like I know one of these days it's going to stop so I'm going to enjoy it."

Shelly whispered, "Don't miss the moments."

These experiences threaded through the parent writing sessions as parent-writers shared in the power of stories. We listened to one another, learned from one another, and felt our hearts connect. Stories connected our experiences. As mothers and grandmothers, so many of the stories we shared through conversation or writing helped us develop a community focused on treasuring memories and moments with our children. We challenged one another to slow down and enjoy our children's childhoods, especially in relation to reading aloud to, writing with, and talking with our children.

## Discussion

A key finding of this study is that the interactive parent writing sessions facilitated parents' understanding of how to support their elementary children's writing development through their personal writing experiences. Participants demonstrated a desire to support their children's writing development, and they needed writing tips and strategies to understand how to help. Parents applied suggestions as parent-writers. Through their sharing, they connected to one another within the writing community and shared a commitment, as parents, to support their children's writing development.

Collaborating with the children's parents helped increase the likelihood that the writing strategies gleaned from the clinic would be used within the home, as the parent writing sessions' and writing clinic content were similar. For the third graders in the writing clinic, preservice and in-service teachers used picture books and their own writing examples as mentor texts. Just as they modeled writing, the tutors encouraged the children to attempt the writing strategies. Similarly, per the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), I modeled writing strategies for parents using picture books as mentor texts and prompts before inviting parents to write. Writing increased throughout the sessions as parents' self-efficacy developed per their writing practice (Pajares & Valiante, 2006) as they felt encouraged through their social interactions (Bandura, 1993).

Writing prompts and reading tasks provide a natural segue into additional areas of literacy. Shared reading experiences, rich with conversation, support children's reading comprehension and emergent literacy skills (Barone, 2011). Picture book read-alouds facilitated the parent-writers' growth as a community via oral and written language. Parents discovered a love for children's literature; many picture books or novel excerpts connect with audiences of all ages (e.g., Ward & Young, 2010, 2011). The content shared throughout the parent writing sessions spoke to parents' hearts as evident in the following conversation:

Katie: "Awww. We didn't get our story."

Danielle: "I did bring a story."

Katie: "Oh, okay! I've been waiting all week!"

Gina: "I want a story."

Katie: "I'm ready for the waterworks. Let me grab my tissue."

Using the read-alouds as mentor texts (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007), parents practiced reading like authors (Smith, 1983) and writing like the authors they read. To write like the authors, parents observed my modeling, which was similar to elementary teachers modeling writing for their students (DeFauw, 2016; Griffith, 2010). Using strategies such as repeated phrases, strong word choice, and dialogue, I modeled reading like a writer and writing like the authors we read. The participants attempted these writing strategies, and their writing experiences provided them a lens as parent-writers. Even though some of them did not identify themselves as writers prior to the sessions, by the end of the parent writing sessions, all parents had completed quick-writes in response to picture book read-alouds. With encouragement, parents chose to share their quick-writes, including lists, stories, memories, maps, and letters, with the group and with their children as well.

Through their participation, parents strengthened their abilities to support their children's writing development at home, thus supporting the home-school literacy connection (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). Family writing tasks provide opportunities

for educators to invite families into the writing process (Bolling, 2004; Kelly, 2004). Through writing, parent-writers transfer their understanding of how to write to how to support their children's writing development. Participants used the writing tips and strategies to make connections to their children's writing requirements in school.

Although the research study design did not provide for data collection to determine parents' implementation of parent writing session content at home, I hope parents used the content to support children's writing development directly and to build family bonds (del Rosario Barillas, 2000; Fleischer & Pavlock, 2012). Parent writing sessions provided them the repertoire they needed to support their children's writing development. At least one participant, Shelly, did implement the dialogue journal strategy at home, providing her daughter an authentic purpose and audience for her writing. As parents experience the writing process and apply strategies learned in such informational sessions, they are more equipped to use those strategies at home. Developing their parent-writer voices also allows parents to develop their understanding of the challenges inherent in writing—challenges their children experience.

This research study highlights the importance of challenging other educators to consider how they may create such opportunities for writing growth for children and parents. There is a great need for high-quality writing instruction to permeate students' lives. It is especially important to support students' first teachers: their parents. Such support can strengthen writing development and, most importantly, family bonds.

### **Future Research and Limitations**

To strengthen this research design, the parent writing sessions need to focus more on “family engagement” versus “family involvement” (Halgunseth, 2009; Summer & Summer, 2014). I need to continue to reflect on how my literacy views and practices as a white researcher differ from the diverse families' literacy practices I support (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2012).

Although other researchers have encouraged families to complete writing activities (Bolling, 2004; Kelly, 2004; Rosado, et al., 2015), the focus of these parent writing sessions included written responses to read-aloud topics, and, more importantly, writing like the authors. Future research should focus on providing parent-writers more concrete strategies and practice with writer's craft to support writing development for themselves and their children. In addition, more research could also be conducted which explores students' perspectives of their parent-writers and provide observational data of research-based writing strategies implemented in the children's homes.

Finally, it is important to note that just because parents are invited to informational sessions, does not mean they will attend. For the Winter 2013 semester, just over half of the families invited attended. Lack of transportation to the university likely factored into parents' inconsistent attendance or lack of involvement in the program. Additionally, the timeframe for the parent writing sessions likely fell at an inopportune time—dinnertime. Thus, enrollment was low across both semesters and consistent participation was a struggle. Other researchers have had higher participation rates, especially if teachers invited the families and made telephone calls to remind families to consider participating (Ortega & Ramirez, 2002). Parents are more likely to participate if they receive personal invitations from the teacher (Anderson & Minke, 2007).

Especially during the Fall 2014 semester, I worried that enrollment would be too high, as all third-grade children and their families were invited to attend. Due to the



research design, however, the literacy specialist sent the invitations; families may not have been as familiar with her role in the school. Also, because every third-grade child and his or her family were invited, the invitation process was not personal. As Anderson and Minke (2007) point out, “although parents experience resource constraints, perhaps when they perceive that their participation is desired by teachers, they find ways to be involved regardless of their resources” (p. 319). Thus, invitations for future sessions will be sent to families from the teacher. Additionally, future sessions will run after school to avoid conflict with evening routines. It would be ideal to provide dinner for families and evolve the parent writing sessions into family-writing sessions.

### Conclusion

To support the home-school literacy connection, parent writing sessions can be hosted for families to provide them with quick-write strategies to connect the picture books they read aloud to their children with writing opportunities: “When mothers and fathers share print and text with a child, their role evolves from one of gaining knowledge at a personal level to becoming empowered resources for and ‘meaning makers’ of their children’s lives” (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005, p. 119). Sharing writing as a family, modeling writing for their children, and helping children identify topics to explore help parents support children’s writing development while strengthening family bonds.

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