

## **Loving Letter Writing**

By Ashley McKittrick

### **The Community**

I teach in a bedroom community outside of a major metropolitan area. It takes about twenty minutes in any direction to get to a city centre. The community was originally developed for cranberry farmers and factory workers in the surrounding areas. As development and housing costs grew in the Lower Mainland, families moved to the area for lower-cost housing near a city centre. There are three specific areas of the community—the original detached homes dating back to 1950, the detached house phase of the early 1990s and the town home phase of the late 1990s to the present. Many of the older homes are being demolished and rezoned for town home construction and at present there are two new town home complexes being developed in the area.

In the past three years an outlet chain has been constructed about seven minutes away from the community. There is a Wal-Mart, Home Outfitters, Best Buy, Hallmark and several clothing and retail stores. This is where many of the families do their shopping. There are also a few fast food chains including a Tim Horton's, A&W, and Taco del Mar. A Starbucks and sushi restaurant have been completed within the last month, much to the excitement of the community. Prior to this retail development, the only place to shop was a strip mall built twenty years ago that most families continue to use. It includes a Price Smart, where families buy most of their groceries, a bowling alley, a Greek restaurant, a Chinese food restaurant, a pizza place, a hair salon, a dollar store/post office, a video store, a dental clinic, a medical clinic, a laundromat and two vacant spaces. Before the construction of the strip mall, the only location for community activity for families in this area was another small neighbourhood that was a ten-minute drive or twenty-minute bike ride away. This nearby neighbourhood contains a restaurant/pub, community centre, and water park.

### **Community Diversity**

In the 1950s the community consisted primarily of Indo-Canadian farmers and lower-income Caucasian families. There was also a large German immigrant population in the area. At the community church there continues to be services offered in both English and German. Since 2000, many new immigrant families have moved into this area. The majority of these new immigrant families come from the Philippines, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Lebanon, the former Soviet Union, and Somalia. It is truly a multicultural community with no less than 20 countries represented.

### **The School**

Prior to 1989, the school was a five-room schoolhouse. The new elementary school/ community centre is now the centre of the community. Families spend most of their time chatting with friends in the foyer of the school/centre and putting their children into programs at the centre. The only library in the area is the school library

except for two book trolleys where families can trade novels on a leave one/ take one basis.

The socio-economic statuses of the families in the community range from working poor to middle- class. Many of the poorer families are on welfare and assisted living. The community centre offers support for families who need out-of-school-care. The occupations in the community include business, service industries and the public sector. There are a few families that can afford to have a stay-at-home parent, or a parent with a part-time job. The new outlet centre has provided many families with part-time job opportunities, allowing parents to be closer to their children. There are only a few families with parents who are in professions such as teaching, nursing and dentistry.

The school is made up of approximately 420 students with class sizes ranging from 22 to 24 in the primary grades and 30 in the intermediate grades. On average English as a Second Language students make up one third to one half of each class. There are over 20 languages represented in the school.

### **The Class**

My class is a Grade 1, made up of 11 girls and 11 boys for a total of 22 students. The predominant language in the class is English; however, Punjabi, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Farsi, Dari Persian, and Spanish are also represented. There are seven designated ESL students. Parents are actively involved in the class and most drop off and pick up their children from the classroom each day. It is a wonderful time to communicate with the parents about the activities their children are involved in. The class has a full-time Educational Assistant (EA) who works with two children. One boy has been diagnosed as severely developmentally delayed and the other boy has many social/emotional issues including anxiety disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and anger management. Generally it is a very happy group of hard working students. The abilities of the students are typical of any grade one class where some students are reading and writing independently, and others are working on letter recognition and sounds.

### **Literacy Practices in the Community and Home**

In order to gain a better understanding of the community and family literacy practices of my class, I gathered information in a variety of ways.

### **Community Literacy**

My first step was to understand more about the community literacy practices. I spent a few afternoons walking about the community and observing literacy practices in action. Print in the community is mainly in the form of environmental print. At the strip mall and the “big box” retail chain stores there are signs and symbols everywhere for people to read. There are sandwich boards that stand outside the stores, newspaper dispensers, and posters that cover the fronts of certain stores. On a “walk-about” I saw families shopping at the Price Smart, some with lists in hand. I walked over to the Baptist church where I saw pamphlets, bibles, message boards, posters and bulletin boards with upcoming events posted, all for the community to read.

Having the school and community centre attached to one another provided another convenient way to gain information about community literacy practices. In the

community centre/school, there were posted signboards posted, advertising baby-sitters, upcoming community functions, PAC (Parent Action Committee) meetings and out-of-school care programs. On the community centre board there was an advertisement for the Tai Chi class (a very popular class at the centre), written in Chinese. There were also many pamphlets put out by the city and school district about literacy and family programs. These pamphlets are put out in both English and Mandarin and occasionally Punjabi. Most of the texts found in the community were for advertising purposes and gathering information.

After walking around the community myself, I took my class on a community walk to see if they could identify environmental print. In groups of four, the children were to be “print-detectives,” and each had a clipboard and pencil to record any print that they saw. Each group had an adult with them to ensure student safety. We began recording as soon as we went down the school steps. The first group spotted print right away and recorded the SLOW DOWN sign written on the pavement of the driveway. The students continued recording environmental print as we made it to the strip mall. As the students acted as “print-detectives,” I would ask if they knew what a sign said, and if so, how did they know? It was interesting to see that many students could “read” the signs, but only a few could answer how they knew. Most of those who could answer said they knew what certain signs said because their parents had told them.

### **Literacy in the Home**

To gain a better understanding of the families in my class, a survey was sent home to find out about the families’ literacy practices (see Appendix 1). The survey was optional and 14 out of 22 were returned.

In addition to the survey, I asked four families of different ethnic backgrounds to take pictures of texts in the home with either their digital camera or a provided disposable camera. Pictures from a Caucasian family, an Indo-Canadian family and Asian-Canadian family were returned;. The photographs that I received reflected many different text types. Environmental print, such as cleaning products and groceries in the refrigerator were photographed most often. All families took pictures of bookshelves with a variety of storybooks, novels, magazines and manuals. Two of the families photographed religious plaques that were inscribed with sayings in their first language.

After going through the surveys and photographs, I noted that most families’ literacy practices revolved around correspondence such as letter writing and emailing, entertainment, daily living and gathering information. It was with this knowledge of literacy practices in the home that I was able to create an authentic lesson for my grade one students.

### **The Lesson: Part One**

Flexibility! Flexibility and using teachable moments are key in authentic literacy learning. I had planned to do a lesson around letter writing as my authentic text genre and had a “set up” ready to go later in the week. I chose letter writing for the authentic text to use in my lesson because 11 surveys out of the 14 that were returned stated that letter writing was a literacy practice found in the homes of my students. Most of the ESL families surveyed wrote that they wrote letters to family members

living in different parts of the world. I was going to have the students write an initial letter to find out what the students knew about letter writing, and then after going to a Robert Munsch play, write a letter to Robert Munsch.

However, on arriving at school on a Tuesday morning, I was informed that one of my students would not be returning to the school. When I told my students that Jason, a very well-liked and kind member of the class, would not be coming back, the students were very saddened by the news and the fact that they did not get to say goodbye to Jason. As we sat at the carpet, this is the conversation that occurred.

*“Well boys and girls, I have some very sad news to tell you.. Jason has moved away and is not coming back to our school.”*

*“Not ever? Not even to visit? I’m gonna miss him!” were the cries of the students.*

*“Ms. McKittrick, we should do something for Jason! Can we write him a card?” shouted out a little girl.*

*“Yah!” agreed another student.*

*“How about emailing Jason. We should send him an email!” cried out one of his good friends.*

*“Well boys and girls these are all great ideas. Unfortunately I know that we can’t send Jason an email because his family doesn’t have a computer. Could we do anything else for Jason to let him know that we are going to miss him?” I asked the students.*

*“We could write him a letter!” shouted out one little girl.*

*“Yah! That’s a great idea!” agreed a little boy.*

*“Boys and girls, I think that Jason would love to hear from us and know that we are thinking of him. I think your idea of writing him a letter is wonderful. But do you know how to write a letter?” I asked. “How about you write down all of the things you would like to say to Jason and then we will come back as a group and share your letters with the group?”*

*“Ms. McKittrick, could we write our own letters and then write a letter all together?” asked Rachel.*

*“That’s a great idea, Rachel! Let’s write our own letters to Jason, and then take all the ideas from your letters and write one big letter together!”*

*“Can we still send our own letters to him?” asked Nick.*

*“Of course, Nick! Jason would love to hear from you. Now boys and girls, we were supposed to be studying about “Spiders” right now. Is everyone alright with writing to Jason instead?”*

*A unanimous cheer for letter writing came out, which I was completely surprised by. My students love science and for them to give that up was truly amazing!*

The students quickly returned to their seats, took out their pencils and got straight to work. I grabbed some paper from the writing centre, had the special helper of the day hand it out, and watched my grade ones get to work! I walked around the class and noticed who knew how to begin a letter, how to close a letter and those who did not. I let them write for about fifteen minutes and then gave them a two-minute warning. If they had finished their letter to Jason, I had them draw a picture at the

bottom of the page. Many of the students could have kept on writing, but I wanted to bring them back together at the carpet to share their letters and to write a class letter to Jason. One by one, the students came up and shared their letters with the class. It was completely optional, however all students were excited to share. (See Figures 2-4 for examples of student writing.)

**Figure 2:**



**Figure 3:**



**Figure 4:**



After the students shared their letters, I asked them if they had noticed any similarities or differences between their letters to Jason. We brainstormed their thoughts on chart paper about what they knew about letter writing (Figure 5). The students were able to note that letters needed to start with a “To” or a “Dear” and the person’s name. They realized that in ending a letter they needed to put a “love” or “from” the person writing the letter. The students also mentioned the convention of saying nice things to the person receiving the letter and asking them questions. Some students thought that writing the date at the top of the letter was very important. Although letter writing is a skill that is taught in the grade four curriculum, it was interesting to see how much they knew, as first graders about letter writing. I asked the students how they knew so much about writing letters and most said that they had seen their parents either write or read letters at home. We finished our brainstorm and then used their recorded ideas to write a class letter to Jason (Figure 6).

Once we finished the class letter, I gave each student an envelope to decorate. The following day, students came with cards and pictures for Jason. We placed these in a large envelope, and I modeled how to address the letter so that it would reach Jason at his new school. I had already bought the stamps for the package and modeled where the stamps go on a letter. The class walked across the street to the mailbox and mailed Jason’s letter. Many students had never actually mailed a letter before so were very excited to do so. This experience prompted many of the girls to spend time in the Writing centre during Centre Time writing letters and cards to different people in their lives.

Figure 5:

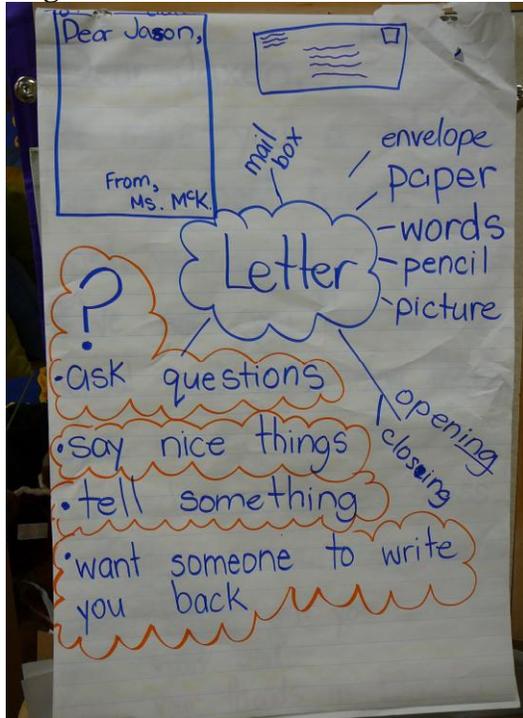
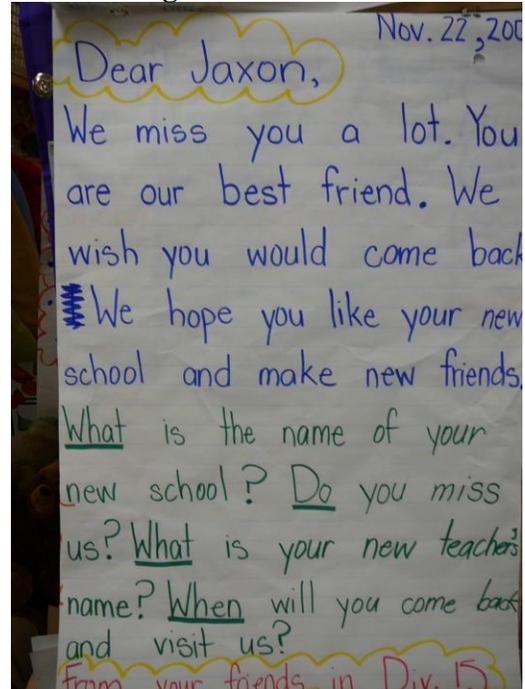


Figure 6:



### Skills

While letter writing was, in itself, a new skill for many of the children in the class, I had planned to use the authentic literacy activity to help students with the print concepts of capitals and punctuation. I have my students write in their Writing book three times a week, and I had noticed that many were using punctuation inappropriately, if at all, and were misusing upper case letters. Most grade one students need work in this area, and although many students in my class 'knew' that capitals are needed to begin sentences and periods end them, most did not have an understanding of what that really meant in practice. By using an entry in their Writing books and a copy of the students' letters to Jason, I was able to assess what each student knew at the beginning of the letter writing activity and what I needed to teach them.

I usually teach the usage of upper case letters to begin sentences and periods to end them in a variety of ways, all of them involving my writing with mistakes and the students catching my mistakes. I do this with Morning Message and other texts I regularly write with the children.

But kids love anything new or different in the class. As part of their letter writing activity, I decided to show the students an example of a real letter that I had received from my grandmother, and how she used capitals and periods. I copied a class set of

the letter and gave each student a highlighter- something that I had never done before with them. They were to act as “capital and period detectives” and highlight any capitals and periods that they found in my grandmother’s letter. After they completed the task, I had a copy of the letter on the overhead and we went through the piece together, finding all of the capitals and periods. At that point I asked the students if they noticed anything special about the capitals and periods. Some of the responses were that there were a lot of them! Others noticed that a period comes before a capital. One student pointed out that there were periods in the middle of a sentence. I asked the student to come up and show me what he had meant. The little boy pointed to the period that he was speaking about and explained that it was wrong because his understanding was that the periods should come at the end of the line. I modeled for the class how it would have sounded if the periods came at the end of a line instead of at the end of a sentence. They thought that was hilarious! I was not sure how many would actually be able to do this on their own, but it was a great lesson for showing capitals and periods in an authentic context.

### **The Lesson: Part Two**

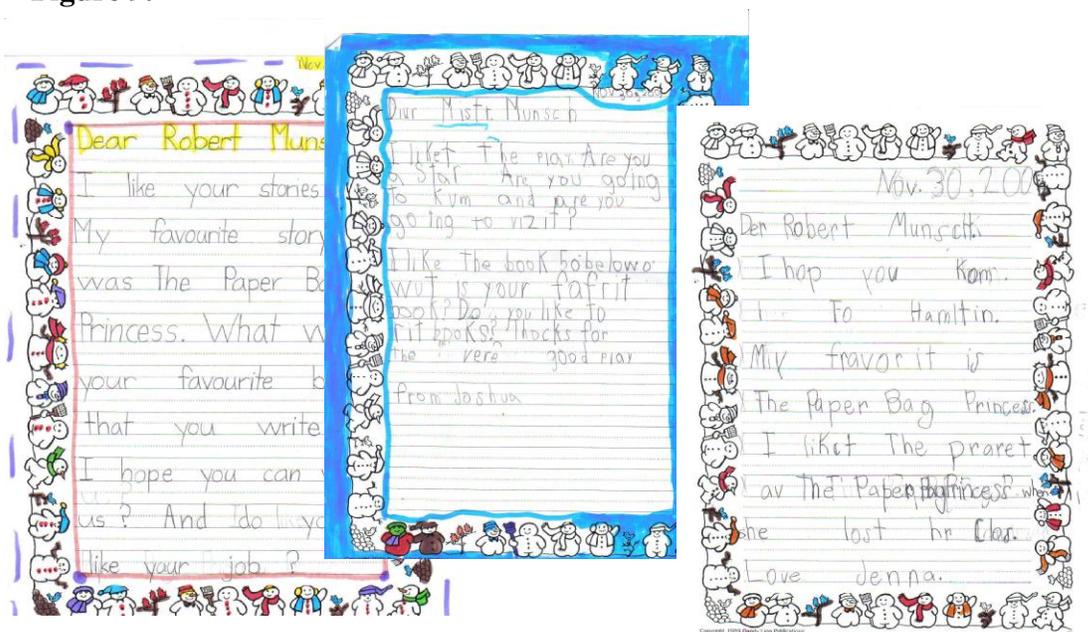
The students had been working on a Canadian author unit on Robert Munsch. To end the unit we were going on a field trip to the play, MunschWorks to see six of Robert Munsch’s books in the form of a play. After writing the letter to Jason, learning the components of letters and working on the concept of print skills, I planned to assess what the children had learned by having the class write letters to Robert Munsch. Hoping to make it an authentic experience, I had wanted the idea to come from the students. Thankfully, one of the little girls who had begun spending much of her time letter writing in the writing centre, came up to me and asked if the class could write letters to Robert Munsch, telling him how much they enjoyed the play. Yes, these moments of excellence do occur in teaching! I asked the little girl if she would mind sharing her idea with the class the next day and she was more than happy to do so.

The next day, as we were sitting at the carpet, the little girl asked to share her idea with the class. Most of the students were more than excited to write a letter to Robert Munsch. I asked the students to write their own letters because each student had his or her own favourite story; therefore, a class letter would not work this time. One student shouted out that he did not want to do this. I told the little boy that he did not have to write a letter to Robert Munsch but he did have to write a letter to someone he knew. In the end, the boy chose to write to Robert Munsch like the rest of his classmates. Before the students set off to write their individual letters, I asked them to remind me what they needed to include in their letters. They identified openings, closings, kind remarks and questions. I asked them also to remember to put in capitals and periods where they belong, to help Mr. Munsch read their letters. To help my grade one students, I wrote the names of the books we had read and seen in the play and Robert Munsch’s name on chart paper. The students wrote for a minimum of twenty minutes. I walked around the class and chatted with the student about their ideas but tried to do as little assisting as possible. When the students were finished they drew a picture or coloured the border on the paper. At the end of the day, I asked if anyone wanted to share the letter they had written with the class.

Most students wanted to, so I chose five students to share their work with the promise that we would finish sharing the rest of the letters the next day.

As I went through the students' letters to Robert Munsch, I noticed that most students were trying to use capital letters and periods in appropriate places. There was a definite improvement in this letter compared to the letter to Jason (Figure 9). However, I believed that my students could do a better job at identifying where they needed to use the proper print conventions, as their input during our skill lessons was not reflected in their letters. The next day I had the students go through their work as "Print Detectives" locating where they should have a period and where upper cases letters were needed. Having them go back to their work and focus on periods and capitals made it much easier for the students to find their mistakes because they were working on one skill at a time.

**Figure 9.**



Once the students had completed the letters and shared them with the class, I brought out envelopes for them. They were so excited to put their own letters into their own envelopes! I knew that with grade one students most printing would be too large to fit onto an envelope. Therefore, I printed address onto labels, and each student placed the address label and a stamp onto his or her own envelope to Robert Munsch. For the return address, each student use the school address stamp. I realized that I could use formatting of an envelope as my next authentic text lesson! The class walked over to the mailbox and each placed their own letter to Robert Munsch into the mailbox. We then waited to see if Robert Munsch will write back.

### Reflections

Over a three-week period, my class worked on the skills of letter writing and the print skills of capital letters and end punctuation. Although we use many "school-based" activities to teach these concepts throughout the year, the authentic lesson was an excellent way of assessing my students' growth, in such a short time. Some

## Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

of the improvements worth noting are within the examples in this document. In Jenna's first piece she was experimenting with punctuation, but did not understand how to use punctuation appropriately. For example, she would place a comma between each word. In her second piece there were no commas, longer sentences and improvements in capitalization (ex: from). With Joshua's first piece of writing there was only one period at the end of the entire piece and the capitals were used incorrectly. In Joshua's letter to Robert Munsch, however, he began to use capitals, question marks and had an improved use of periods. Celia also showed improvements from her beginning assessment to final letter. In her first letter, Celia wrote short, stilted sentences that were only as long as the line. In her letter to Robert Munsch, Celia began the wrapping of sentences and using question marks, which was a pleasure to see.

It was apparent that my students really did benefit from reading and writing authentic text. My Writing Centre has never been as popular and the students are already asking if we can write letters to Santa.