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Authentic Writing in Children's Lives Outside School

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Ashley Grimes is a mother of three children aged six, seven and eight. She became involved in the NOW Play project as a research assistant in 2015, when she was living in northern Alberta. Ashley currently resides in central Alberta, where she is studying full time for her Bachelor of Commerce degree. She works part-time as an office manager at a financial office and part-time at a daycare centre as a childcare worker.

Abstract

In this paper, a mother of three young children and a university professor and former primary teacher make a case for teachers to initiate conversations with parents about their children's writing practices at home. We define writing as marks and scribbles, as well as drawings, letters, words and sentences, that are intended to make meaning and communicate with others. We discuss ways in which Ashley's children, aged four to seven years old at the time this article was written, use writing to express desires, encourage others to do something, and develop relationships with family members. We provide examples of the children's self-initiated writing to communicate needs and desires, express emotions and develop relationships with others in the wider world. Our paper draws from research showing that young children's everyday interactions with family and community members provide a strong foundation for children's language, literacy and overall

learning. We provide suggestions for teachers who wish to initiate or deepen partnerships with parents and caregivers to support young children's writing.

In her study of eighteen families' literacy diaries documenting the texts read and written by pre-school children over a four-week period, Marsh (2003) found that although families imported literacy practices from school, little information reached the school about the everyday literacy practices going on in homes. She proposed that there should be two-way traffic of information and take-up of literacy practices between home and school. This is the underlying theme of our paper, which we hope will be a starting point for conversations about ways for teachers to learn more about the literacy practices in their students' lives, and ways to build on those practices in classrooms.

We are a mother of three children, aged four through seven years old, in central Alberta and an Alberta primary teacher turned university professor who have been meeting two to three times each year for three years to talk about ways to support young children's writing. Ashley, who is working part-time while completing a distance undergraduate economics program, has documented many ways that her children, four-year-old Chloe, five-year-old Kaden, and seven-year-old Alexis, communicate symbolically, using scribbles, drawings and letters.

Ashley volunteered to take part in a research study examining ways in which northern rural parents and K-1 teachers in four provinces can support children's oral language and writing. Shelley, the professor, was able to contact Ashley through the Families First organization (operated through Alberta Health Services) in the northern Alberta community in which the project is situated. Shelley is very grateful to Ashley, as she is one of two parents who volunteered to participate and has

stayed in touch after moving to rural central Alberta during the second year.

Ashley believes that parents and other family members have a role in supporting their children's writing and that it is not exclusively the school's responsibility. It is important for parents and other family members to show interest in their children's scribbles, drawings and writing, and to create meaningful opportunities for children's written communication, such as writing letters to Santa Claus, with personal responses returned to the children from a North Pole address. She also involves her children, wherever possible, in authentic writing experiences that are part of her life. Ashley invites her children to contribute suggestions when she uses apps or paper and pen to create a grocery list. The children accompanied Ashley when she created an ad to sell a stroller on BuySellTrade.ca, a classified ad website. They observed her writing the text, taking a picture of the stroller and attaching it to the print ad. These types of texts send a clear message to children that written and visual images are valuable for achieving real-life purposes. Indeed, Ashley received a number of text messages with offers on the stroller during the morning we met in Ashley's kitchen to write this paper.

Our paper draws on an extensive body of research carried out across decades showing that young children's everyday interactions with family and community members provide a strong foundation for children's language, literacy and overall learning (Compton-Lilly 2009; Mui and Anderson 2008; Purcell-Gates 1996; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988). A review of this literature led Cairney (2003) to conclude that "there is a rich diversity of literacy practices within families that should be acknowledged and tapped" by classroom teachers (p 91). Yet as Lightfoot (2004) found, in the hurly-burly of everyday classroom teaching, teachers may overlook the important role of parents and other family members, and may view them "as both resources that can be tapped and obstacles to be overcome" (p 12). Furthermore, parents and other family members and caregivers may not be aware of the significant role that they play (Greene and Long 2011).

We offer a more encouraging picture of the role of parents in children's home literacy practices, discussing authentic writing that Ashley's children created at home for a range of purposes and audiences. We draw on previous researchers' cataloguing of home literacy practices to group Alexis's, Chloe's and Kaden's writing according to the intended social purpose and audience. Cairney and Ruge (1998), for example, use the purpose and

intended audience (eg, writing letters or notes to relatives or friends to establish or maintain relationships; writing shopping lists or list of chores to display information; writing songs and stories or drawing and labelling pictures for pleasure and/or self-expression; and writing the alphabet for skills development) to categorize literacy practices. Others, such as McNaughton (1995), who catalogued literacy practices of Maori, Samoan and Pakeha families, focused on the people involved in literacy practices (eg, joint activities in which a family member guided a young child to carry out a writing activity; personal activities initiated and carried out independently by the child; and ambient activities that are carried out by the people in the child's life). We have combined these features to categorize child-initiated writing practices in Ashley's home.

After presenting research that informs our understandings about young children's writing, we discuss Ashley's children's writing, and conclude with suggestions for ways in which teachers might find out more about their students' home literacy practices and make connections between children's home and school writing.

Views on Young Children's Writing

We see children's symbolic communication, on the page, screen, sidewalk and other platforms for expressing themselves symbolically, as representations of their growing understandings about the world and their relationships with the people and objects within their social and natural environments and their hypotheses about print (Rowe 2009). We define *writing* as children's dots, scribbles, lines, circles and other shapes, as well as drawings, letters, words and sentences, that are intended to communicate with others. When children make marks on a page or other platform with intention, we say that they are writing (Lancaster 2007). In the process of representing ideas symbolically and carrying out social intentions through those symbols, children are constructing and testing out their understandings and hypotheses about print (Clay 1975; Mackenzie, Scull and Bowles 2015; Puranik and Lonigan 2011). Teachers who provide opportunities for children to "play" with writing show that they value children's writing "as a form of communication equal to other vital forms of communication" (Pahl 1999, 70). Like Kress (1997), we believe that when children come to school, they "come as thoroughly experienced makers of meaning, as experienced

makers of signs in any medium that is to hand” (p 8). Children learn not only the conventions of the written symbols, but also about the significance and usefulness of print symbols, the ways in which ideas are organized in particular contexts to achieve particular purposes with chosen audiences, what ideas are salient in particular contexts and so forth (Anning 2003). These cultural understandings, learned in everyday interactions with people and with environmental and other forms of print, are reproduced and transformed in children’s writing (Rowe 2009).

Three Children’s Home Writing Practices

In this section, we describe some of the writing that Ashley’s children have been creating, grouping the writing by the intended audience and then describing various purposes for the writing.

Child-Initiated Writing to Adult Family Members and Friends

Ashley’s children use writing to communicate with the people in their life whom they know will understand written communication. Most often, these people are Ashley and her husband, but the intended audience for their self-initiated writing has also been extended family members and friends. In the examples below, writing is a tool for the three children to make their needs and desires known (often in playful ways) so that others will help them satisfy the needs or desires.

Writing to Express Desires and Encourage Others to Do Something

From the scribbles of messages written at the age of five to the messages using a combination of invented and conventional spelling of today, seven-year old Alexis writes messages after she and her siblings are put to bed. She can always find paper and writing materials in her bedroom, where much of her writing is composed. Alexis may fold the message, which often says something about desires, such as wanting to stay up later than her younger siblings, into a paper airplane and then fly it into the living room, or she may slide the message under the bathroom door when a parent is inside.

Alexis also provides information to her parents about the grocery items she feels they should buy at the grocery store through writing her own grocery lists. These lists, written using invented spelling, contain food items not usually found on the family shopping list. Sometimes items from her list end up in the grocery cart, but Ashley says that if she were to buy everything on Alexis’s list, there would be a

lot of sugar in the house! Alexis’s four-year old sister, Chloe, writes stories for a similar purpose—hinting that she would like her mother to interrupt her university course work to do something with Chloe. Her stories are typically about a girl named Chloe with the best-ever mom. In one story, fictional Chloe’s mother bought Chloe ice cream after they went to the park. Real-life Chloe scribbles her story, looking up at her mother as she writes to ensure that her mother is listening and getting the implied message (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Chloe’s story writing

Writing to Create Identities

Five-year old Kaden is starting to draw pictures of his family and the things they do together, such as going swimming (see Figure 2). He writes words that he knows (eg, *mom*, *dad*, *Love Kaden*) and explains who is in the picture and what they are doing when his parents ask about the pictures. Kaden also draws letters, making the sounds of the letters as he writes, on the chore chart. He is practising letters he has learned at school and always shows his parents what he has written. Kaden’s drawings and his writing provide a starting point for conversations with adults that highlight what he can do and what is important to him—another way of enriching relationships with the

significant people in his life and his identity as a member of the family and a communicator using the powerful tool of writing.



Figure 2: Kaden's writing and drawing about his family

Whereas Kaden's initial use of symbols to engage family members involved pictures, letters and words, Chloe's first use involved scribbles to record stories that she narrated aloud to her family. The meaning was communicated in the scribbles and in the way she wrote them. Ashley remembers that Chloe's scribbles were fast and vigorous when she was narrating lots of action (eg, "We were walking down the street and a big dinosaur chased us") and the scribbles were slow and gentle while she narrated parts of the story with less action, such as "Then we got away and went to bed." From the age of three years old, Chloe has confidently used writing for meaningful purposes and has felt a strong sense of being a writer.

Maintaining a relationship with her grandmother in northern Alberta is also a purpose for Alexis's self-initiated writing. Since her Grade 1 teacher introduced letter writing, Alexis has been writing to and receiving postcards from her grandmother. Additionally, Alexis sometimes teases her mother by crossing out and adding her own messages to her teacher in the agenda used for communication between the home and

teacher. In Figure 3, Alexis crossed out the message that Ashley had written to Alexis's teacher (that she would be going to daycare) and wrote: "Mom will be." Ashley added in the "ha ha!" to show her appreciation of Alexis's sense of humour.

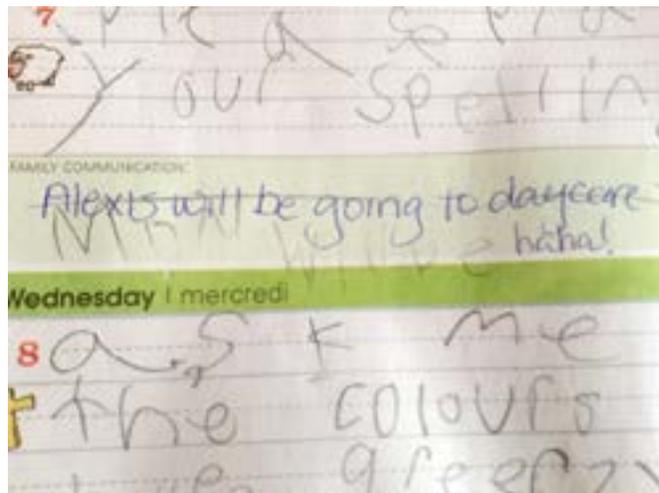


Figure 3: Alexis's use of writing to tease her mother

Alexis uses writing to develop her relationships with friends at her daycare, as well. She asks Ashley how to spell words to write letters with invitations such as, "Can you please paint a picture with me?" to give to her friends.

In these stories that Ashley has shared about her children, we see that Alexis, Kaden and Chloe are finding a number of authentic purposes for communicating through writing/drawing/scribbling within their circle of family and friends. Their audience is usually someone (such as the adults in their lives) who they know will be able to interpret their writing.

Child-Initiated Writing to Communicate with the Wider World for a Range of Purposes

Alexis and Chloe also use writing to communicate with unknown and imagined audiences beyond their immediate relationship circle. Although this writing is often intended to serve similar purposes as the writing to those close by, the expanded audience seems to open up possibilities for a wider range of purposes for the writing.

Chloe learned that communicating with the wider world can help achieve intentions, such as getting a desired gift for Christmas. Chloe's letter to Santa requesting a goldfish for Christmas prompted a written response on Christmas Day. She found a fishbowl under the Christmas tree and a gift coupon that said, "Good for one free fish from Santa." Ashley had paid the pet-store clerk when she

bought the fishbowl, so that when Chloe gave the clerk the coupon, the clerk said, “Here are all the fish Santa sent in for the kids.” Print had played a significant role in Chloe’s becoming the owner of a pet goldfish, a role that was reinforced by the pet-store clerk.

This past Christmas, Alexis decided to make a Christmas card for Santa when he came to their hometown and met with children in his sleigh on the main street. She wrote, “I love you Santa. See you on Christmas Eve. I’ll leave you lots of cookies.” Santa showed his appreciation and said he would bring the card home for Mrs Claus to read, as well. This is only the beginning of Alexis’s written communication with others beyond her immediate social circle. Having experienced the power of print to create relationships with others, Alexis is now seeking addresses of her favourite Disney characters to write fan mail to them. Her reach as a writer is extending far beyond the bounds of her home life.

Alexis used writing to take action when she felt moved to do so. One instance followed the viewing of a YouTube video about cats and dogs doing funny things. She was enjoying the video until it was interrupted by an advertisement for an animal rescue agency showing emaciated and abused puppies. This pop-up video showed up in spite of the parental control being turned on. Alexis asked questions about how animals could be treated so horribly and expressed her concerns. Ashley pointed out that the dogs were rescued and looked in good health at the end of the video, but the images continued to disturb Alexis. She wrote the note in Figure 4 a few days later, leaving it on her bed for Ashley to find. Alexis realized that she had addressed it to animals that wouldn’t be able to read it, saying to Ashley: “It’s too bad dogs can’t read.”

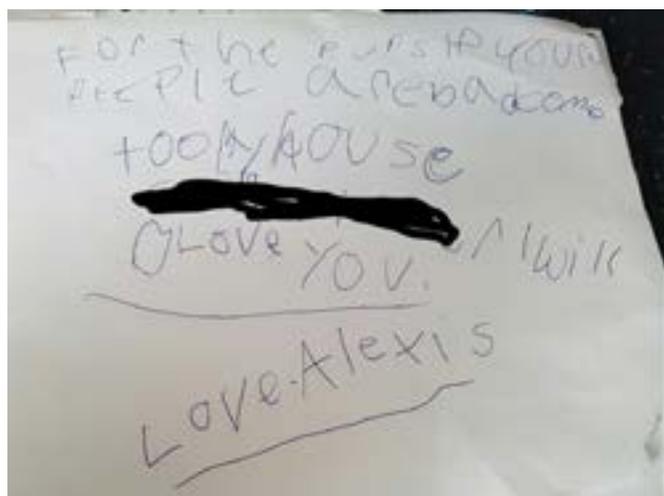


Figure 4: Alexis’s note to puppies

The note reads, *For the pups. If your people are bad, come to my house (address is blacked out). I will love you. Love, Alexis.* In spite of not being able to communicate directly with the puppies in the advertisement, Alexis wanted to do something that was meaningful to her. Writing had been of great use to Alexis in developing and enriching relationships, and in helping her satisfy desires and needs. Now, she had found a way to harness the power of writing to help others.

Two-Way Communication about Children’s Writing

As we sit around Ashley’s kitchen table talking and writing about the three children’s writing, we are excited about the many creative ways in which Alexis, Kaden and Chloe make meaning with print, scribbles and drawings in their lives outside the classroom. We also find it remarkable that the children have such high expectations for their use of written communication. They show fundamental understandings about text that are identified in the literature (Anning 2003; Rowe 2009)—that it helps them to make meaning and to carry out social purposes. The three children create symbolic texts, confident that the texts will help them to do something that matters to them in their immediate social world and, as is the case with school-aged Alexis, with the wider world.

As Marsh (2003) proposed, if it were possible to open up two-way communication avenues between parents and teachers, there could be a more seamless partnership between home and school to support children’s writing. Based on our experience as parent and teacher, we believe that the two-way communication will likely have to start with invitations from teachers, as parents and other family members or caregivers might not feel comfortable starting these conversations. Parent-teacher conferences are a great place for teachers to ask parents questions about the writing/scribbling/drawing that children do at home. Teachers might also send an invitation in the classroom newsletter, asking parents/caregivers and children to select children’s home writing to bring to school to celebrate with the rest of the class in author’s circle. Teachers may provide suggestions for contexts and types of writing that children might do at home, as well. Shelley has learned from a Grade 1 teacher participating in the research project in northern Alberta that children and parents enjoy pasting or stapling children’s home writing in a scrapbook that the teacher gives to children at the beginning of the school year. She asks parents to

bring the scrapbooks to parent–teacher conferences so they can talk about the child’s writing at home and at school.

We believe that these stories about children’s home writing would add rich detail to the picture of each child that teachers create through daily classroom observations. In addition to learning about how children communicate through drawings, scribbles and writing (Clay 1975; Mackenzie, Scull and Bowles 2015), teachers learn about their students’ interests, their views of themselves as writers and their understandings about what they can do with print and other modes of communication. The children’s writing shows teachers how they are applying what they are learning in school in a real-world context, and also may provide ideas for writing forms and writing purposes that could be taken up in classroom writing. Invitations to parents to show and talk about their children’s writing at home are the starting point. Children’s learning in primary classrooms can be enriched when their teachers recognize and build on the writing that children initiate in their out-of-school lives.

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