

“Are You the Teacher Who Gives Parents Homework?”

by

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EVERYONE knows what it means to be the parent of a fourth grader at this school:

It means the beginning of new things.

It means that there's a bus ride every day and you wonder whether your child will be safe.

It means it is both an exciting and scary time.

It means he [your child] has made the transition from a small school to a school twice the size of the primary school. He is reunited with old friends.

It means experiencing new things like doing homework at age 43.

With statements such as these, parents of my fourth graders responded to their first writing assignment. Along with a letter home welcoming them to the school, I had included a request that they try the same writing prompt I had used on the second day of class with their children. On that day, I asked students to write on the topic, “Everyone knows what it means to be a fourth grader,” using as stylistic inspiration E. B. White’s 1943 essay, “Everyone Knows What Democracy Is” (“It’s the line that forms on the right. . . . It’s an idea which hasn’t been disproved yet. . . . Democracy is a letter to the editor. Democracy is the score at the beginning of the ninth. . . .”) Now parents would write on the same topic, but with a twist: Everyone knows what it means to be the *parent* of a fourth grader.

And I know what it means to teach in my intermediate school — grades four through six — in the flatlands of a less affluent section of Berkeley, California. I know that most of the parents of the twenty-four children in my fourth grade class are anxious for their children to succeed and apprehensive about their well-being.

My fourth graders face a situation similar to kindergarten, since they are now the youngest children in the school. Their primary school had no more than 200 students; in this new school the student population is approximately 600.

Children are bused to school, a reflection of the District’s policy of integration. Thus, my class reflects a racial mix with approximately 50% African American, 40% Caucasian, and 10% Hispanic and Asian students. Academically, the range goes from the first percentile to the ninety-ninth percentile on standardized tests. Children come from two-parent families, single-parent families, and families in which children are being raised by grandparents. Some families are affluent, others are on welfare. Four children are identified as ESL (English as a Second Language) students.

Everyone who will be attending the school has heard troubling rumors — daily fights on the school yard, green hot-dogs for lunch, intimidation by older students. For those students taking the bus for the first time, the realization that when something is amiss they can't walk home can be daunting to both parents and children.

It was in this setting that I decided I wanted to use writing to build a sense of community and to provide a forum for students and parents to express fears, anxieties, and concerns.

I wanted to keep track of what happened when parents and children wrote about the same subject. It was my belief that through writing a teacher can include those families who might otherwise feel alienated from the school; it's a way for parents to stay involved in their children's education. I was also interested in what effect, if any, the parental writing might have on the children. This was another form of communication for the children, the parents, and the teacher.

Parents responded enthusiastically to my homework assignment. I told my four ESL students to tell their parents to feel free to write in their native language which was either Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, or Korean. All of the parents in the class responded within five days. One parent wrote entirely in Chinese and one in Korean. I was concerned that I have an accurate translation of what the parents had written in their native language. One of the other parents had a doctorate in Chinese history and was fluent in both spoken and written Chinese. With regard to the response in Korean, I asked a professor at a nearby university if she could translate the parental response.

In translation, the Korean mother wrote about the experience her child had the year before and the hopes and desires she had for her child this year:

We came from Korea over one year ago. For both the children and the adults, life in the United States was very disorienting. After time passed, life settled down. We became more stable and got sensibilities back. Children can adapt to life in the United States much faster than adults.

The first school the children went to was a primary school. They adapted slowly. The children became interested in school. They made friends. More than anything else, they seemed interested in computers and science. After a year, they were very attached to the school. After my oldest child finished third grade, the child moved to the intermediate school.

She cried almost every night silently during that time. I asked why she cried. At first, she didn't say. But then the child said that she missed her friends and teachers. At that moment, my eyes watered. Even for her young heart, it must have been difficult for her to leave her first American school.

I cannot attend to my child's education. For that I am sorry and must apologize to the teachers and parents. But I am still hopeful and slowly getting through this difficult experience. I hope that my child will have the chance to learn to be independent.

Why did I want my parents to write? The last two sentences of this mother's "homework" precisely state my goal:

Only when skilled teachers and the parents of our children form a community will there be an education for the children. Then this will be a great school.

A response from the Chinese father, written in Chinese, was so moving that I felt that it was important to share his writing

with all of the children and parents. Instead of responding to what it was like to be the parent of a fourth grader at the school, he wrote about the importance of writing:

— *Writing is extremely important for one's whole life. If a person makes all kinds of mistakes in the ideograms and syntax in daily correspondences and messages, he will expose his own lack of literate skills and will not be respected. Besides, since this person cannot accurately express his own ideas, his whole life would run into road-blocks. He will not be able to find a good job; he will constantly make a fool of himself. On the other hand, if a person is very eloquent and can write well, he will be respected by society.*

Just take myself, for example. When I was in China, I was in the literary field. I was very skillful in Chinese. I could use the most beautiful, moving language to describe events, to compose poems, songs, and to create fiction. So I was recognized by society, respected by people. Just by writing I was able to support my family and led an upper-middle-class life. I could contribute to society. Ever since I came to the States, I couldn't even scribble a simple message. I couldn't find a good job. I can only function within the small confines of the Chinese community. Aside from enjoying the democratic freedoms of the United States, I have to start from the "ABC."

I read parents' responses to the class as soon as they were brought in. They answered with sincere feeling and honesty. The responses from the non-English speaking parents gave all of us an insight as to what it is like to come to a new country where you need to learn a new language in order to communicate and to become part of the community.

I selected portions of each response and put them into two separate essays, one from the children and one from the parents. Later, I sent these papers home to the parents, introducing the children to the parents and to each other. Included in the student essay were responses such as:

It means you feel small even when you usually don't. It's not like being the oldest, it's being the youngest. Maybe the big kids will pick on you and tease you. When you're in fourth grade you feel like you're back in kindergarten.

The parents essay included responses like:

It means the beginning of new things. It means the first time taking the bus. It means the school can be intimidating. As a parent I do worry about that big, rowdy playground.

Even early in the school year, I was beginning to see the positive results of parents' "homework." Many parents, including English-speaking parents, are hesitant to come to school and enter the life of the school. However, these parents were eager to be part of the classroom community, and non-native speakers of English particularly welcomed the opportunity to write in their native language given this chance. One father made it a point to stop by the class on his way to work and tell me that he really enjoyed the writing and hoped that it would continue. The written parental response gave all the parents the opportunity to be part of the class. They didn't have to participate in "traditional" ways such as volunteering to tutor or be room mothers.

All of the parents came to our Back to School Night, held during the first month of school. In the past, non-English speaking

parents have not participated in this event, and I believe that my initial request that they participate through writing made these parents feel welcome and very much part of this classroom community.

Because I was encouraged by parents' responses to the first request for writing, I wanted to continue to involve them in the writing, but I didn't want to impose. I had started a bulletin board called "Student of the Week" to give students an opportunity to become acquainted with each other. Students were responsible for the board, which included pictures and other artifacts that they wanted to share with the class. One of the students suggested that we ask the parents of the student of the week if they would either write, tape record, or come in and talk to the class and tell stories about that student.

A number of parents responded. Several wrote about their child, and others came in to talk to the class. The board created a safe writing environment and gave the parents an opportunity to teach. For example, in the midst of our sixth year of drought, one mother began her introductions of her son by writing:

The week before he was born, it rained so hard that our basement flooded! Nine years ago, it rained a lot.

One of the first parents to write for the Student of the Week board said that this was the first time that her child had ever seen her writing something other than bills, that it had been a long time since she had written anything like this, and that she was quite nervous about how the class would react to her writing. She talked about how her daughter had spent days looking through the photo albums before making the final selection of about 12 pictures. The daughter then discussed in detail with her mother what she thought her mother should write:

Mitzi was born on a hot humid summer day in New York City. A delicious beautiful honeydew helped bring on the birth that day, so I often think of her as my honeydew. When Mitzi was a baby, she was easygoing, attentive, and a lot of fun.

Mitzi, her dad, and I moved from New York to the Bay Area when she was nine months old. She did not get a chance to pick up a Brooklyn accent. At ten months, she began swimming at Strawberry Canyon which has become one of our favorite watering holes.

Since she was two years old, Mitzi has enjoyed reading. She has also become an artist, making interesting projects, and beautiful ceramics and pictures. Mitzi has developed a strong, melodic singing voice which is often heard when she plays dress up. Mitzi attended a primary school from kindergarten to third grade and was in the Chinese Bilingual Program which taught her about Chinese culture and to speak some Chinese.

In her ninth year, Mitzi is a collector of Little Mermaid things, an avid reader of Sweet Valley Twins and the Boxcar Children, a fan of M. C. Hammer, and a good baker and cleaner-upper. She is very perceptive person, and we have lots of interesting talks. Mitzi cares very much about how the homeless and poor people are treated. I am very proud of her, and while I am writing about her my heart is smiling.

The board soon became more than just a place to meet each other. It was a reminder to the children that “our” parents do write, and it gave parents a way to work with children in a direct way, without conflict, since everyone wanted to ac-

comply the same goal — communicating information about the child and, sometimes, about the entire family. For example, Tami's dad wrote:

Best Friends

The day Tami was born at home on my bed, and started almost immediately sucking on my little finger, I knew she would be my best friend and sidekick for life. We do many things together but here are some of our favorite things to do:

1. "Check it out" — *this is where I have to check out Tami's tickliest ticklish spots to make sure they are still working. When she laughs so hard she can't breathe, then I know they are working just fine.*

2. "Flip out" — *Tami will take a running jump into the air and in mid-air I will flip her over somersaulting onto the bed or couch.*

3. "Shopping" — *Tami and I do all the food shopping for our family. Her job, as I understand it, is to make me as crazy as possible by seeing how much she can make me buy that is not on our list. She is VERY GOOD at this game!*

4. "Working" — *Tami likes to help me whenever she can. At the shop she helps us answer the phones, and wraps presents for customers, and also helps Ron at the register. She even has her own time card!*

I know some day Tami will outgrow some of these games, but I also know we will find other ways to play and be best friends, and I am looking forward to that. I am very blessed to have Tami as my daughter and best friend.

In addition to the writings from both of Tami's parents, her grandparents from Tennessee sent a card with a picture of themselves and Tami which included the following message to the class:

We are Tami's proud grandparents. We feel lucky to have such a loving and considerate granddaughter. She is loyal to family and friends and, we feel, pretty smart. The many things she undertakes she completes and enjoys. We hope she always continues to do good and caring things.

— *Gramma & Grampa*

When Tami's father finally came to the classroom, the students treated him like an old acquaintance.

One of the students, who had recently moved in with her grandparents, came to me and said that she didn't think she wanted to do the board. I told her to go home and ask her grandparents if they would help her. Her board included the following from her grandmother:

Latrice was born in Austin Texas in the early spring of 1972. She was a beautiful baby and all the family was delighted because she was someone very special.

Latrice's mom and dad moved to the Bay Area when she was three months old. She was a cheerful and active baby, fun to be with. When she was about three years old she loved to listen to music. She always fooled around with radios and other musical instruments. When she started talking, she always tried to sing and repeat words from songs. She loved music very much.

Latrice has many tapes of songs and a collection of Barbie dolls, stuffed animals and books.

Latrice is a very friendly little girl and she has many friends in the neighborhood where we live. We have faith in her, and expect great things from her.

All the children seemed to take interest in their parents' writings. In an interview, one parent said that she really had to think about what she thought the children would like to know about her son and what would not embarrass him. It turned out that all of the parental writing for the Student of the Week boards was edited by the children — or at least they made the attempt. Hannah's parents decided that they wanted to tell their unique, humorous version of how Hannah was born even though Hannah didn't want them to:

All three moons were out the night Hannah was born.

It can be cold on Mars, but we were enjoying unusually warm weather for the birthing season.

Over three million babies were born on that day our Hannah was born. Parking was difficult that day and we almost had to have her at school.

Hannah was born brilliant. She could play the piano and the violin at the same time. She could also recite the King James Bible from memory on her third day. By her fifth day she could explain Einstein's misguided theory of relativity.

Since coming to the planet earth she has forgotten all of this and believes a different story of her birth. But that is good since we as a family are trying to fit in to the earth's society.

Hannah believes she was born on earth in the year of our Lord 1982 on Friday March 5...

All the parents, not only the English speakers and writers, contributed to their child's board. Mei's mother, a physicist who now works as a maid, wrote in Chinese which was then translated. Both the mother's writing and translation were part of the board:

My daughter, Mei, was born in Beijing, China, on Jan. 26, 1982. After a long and painful night, Mei was born at dawn, kicking and crying into the world. It happened to be Chinese New Year, so we can say that she was born on the dawn of a new year. This is why her father gave her the name Dawn. We also hoped that China would emerge from the darkness of totalitarianism into the dawn of modern democracy during her lifetime.

Hiroshi's mother asked for an extra two weeks so that she could spend more time working on her story of Hiroshi. It was worth waiting for:

Hiroshi was born on December 13, 1981 in a small town in Japan, where the old inheritance system is still alive. Born to be a successor of a clan, he was celebrated like a prince, and was overwhelmed by gifts, courtesy and love. Both of his parents were not at all strict, and did not even try to be. Such a life during his infancy conditioned his present personality: Unambitious, but generous...

The class was learning about each other through the parent writing. And we were also learning from these parents in a very special way about different cultures and traditions.

In addition to placing the parent writing on the bulletin board, parent writing was also featured in the weekly class newspaper. The parents, along with their children, looked forward to the Student of the Week feature. One mother said:

I've known some of these parents for years, and their writing shows a side of them that I've never seen before!

The approaching holidays suggested another piece of writing. I asked parents and children to discuss and write about a tradition, a holiday, or special occasion that the family observed or celebrated. Some parents wrote about their own childhood celebrations. Some parents planned the piece with the child. Some wrote their own paper on the same holiday that the child wrote about, while others wrote about a holiday of their own choice. In one family the child wrote a short paper about Thanksgiving, while his mother wrote a six-page paper about her family's celebration of Christmas in Pittsburgh. She described how exciting it had been for her to write about Christmas in her family:

It brought tears to my eyes. It made me realize how we've moved away from established family traditions since Dan and I started working. I was really moved by the experience. I feel that by my writing about Christmas it encouraged Jon to write more about Thanksgiving.

Many of my African American students and their families shared their experiences at family reunions:

Son: Every year our family gets together in the Summer. The Summer before last Summer the family came here, then we went to L.A. We went to Disney Land for a day. Two days later we went to Mexico. We stayed there for three days and two nights. Just about all of the time we go to New York...

Father: Our family has always been very close. When we were small, my father always allowed other family members to live with us when they needed help. Uncles, aunts,

cousins, and people who I had never seen before, stayed with us for short periods of time throughout my childhood. Although the house was often crowded I learned to appreciate the sense of togetherness . . . One of the things that has helped to keep us close is an annual family reunion. We don't have a set date or place for the reunion each year, but we never allow more than a year to go by before we get together. Sometimes a graduation brings us together. Last year it was my sister's wedding and the birth of my other sister's second child. What ever it takes, we find a reason to come together. . .

A 1991 article in *Scholastic News* marking the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor pointed our student-family writing teams in a new direction. I wanted to call on family resources to help students learn more about World War II. Many children call December 7 "Pearl Harbor Day" but have absolutely no idea what it means or stands for. I realized that most if not all of the parents of the students were either too young or had not been born before or during the War.

The children went home and interviewed grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors. For those students who were not able to locate anyone to interview, we found volunteer interviewees around the school. The class was learning about history from primary sources. One of the school secretaries, a second-generation Japanese American woman whom the students knew as the one who answered their questions and soothed their wounds, responded to the questions as follows:

What do you remember best about the war?

My father was separated from us because he was taken by the F.B.I. but we were united in a camp.

What do you remember about the end of the war?

I was sad because my parents had to return to Japan and I had to stay in America.

Several children called their grandparents. Tami called her grandfather in Nashville and learned for the first time that her grandfather's brother had been killed in the war. Hiroshi's grandfather in Japan answered:

What do you remember best about the war?

I was safe from the atomic bomb.

What do you remember about the end of the war?

Good because I didn't have to go to war. The war ended two days before I went to the front battle. I was not strong enough for a soldier, so I did not have to go to fight unlike young people of my age.

I stayed in several cities in Japan preparing for battle. I spent most of my time in Hiroshima. On August 4, I was ordered to join the front battle and I move to Shikoku.

It was just two days after I moved to Shikoku that the atomic bomb was thrown to Hiroshima on August 6 in the morning.

The order to move to Shikoku saved my life accidentally.

We had just finished reading *Sadako and the Thousand Cranes*, about the bombing of Hiroshima. When I finished reading the Japanese grandfather's interview, the children looked at Hiroshi in wonder. Finally, one of the children said, "It's a good thing he left Hiroshima on August 6, otherwise you wouldn't be here today." Hiroshima and the atom bomb became a reality for the children through this interview.

The children were so intrigued with the World War II interviews that I asked the parents to share their memories of another historic event, the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many of the parents had stark memories of that event. Gregory's godmother was visiting the night of this assignment and she shared her memories with us:

I was attending John Adams Junior High School in Los Angeles, California. Like many of my classmates, I thought it was going to be just another school day. It started out that way, just another school day that is, until the announcement came over the loud speaker . . . Dr. Martin Luther King had been shot and killed on a balcony in Alabama. The silence was so heavy in the classroom, and the school, that it held everyone in their places, as if frozen in time. After moments, tears began to fall. The teachers, people who you thought didn't have emotions, were just crying. No one could think, everyone just reacted. I remember the death of Dr. Martin Luther King as a point in history and time when the entire nation felt a great loss simultaneously and wept!

School was closed early and I walked home in silence. Once home, my family was glued to the television and radio, not wanting to miss any bits of information and yet hoping in my young mind that there had been a mistake, that the announcement was some kind of sick joke. Every time I saw his face, heard someone mention his name or heard his voice, a solemn feeling would cover my body.

Till this day, many years later, the sound of his voice or the mention of his name causes me to stop in my tracks, frozen and remember. The feeling of loss is something I will have to live with for the rest of my life. For I shall never forget Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

One mother shared her vivid childhood memories:

I was living in Mississippi at the time of his death. I was only 8 years old, but I remember. I remember sitting in the living room looking at TV when the newsman came on saying that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed by a white man whose name was James Earl Ray who hated him and all blacks. I was very sad, tears running down my face as I looked at my mother all in tears. She was so sad, mad, upset to hear the bad news about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I asked my mother why did they kill him and who are they? I wanted to know. Then I saw on TV that the white people really hated blacks. I had the feeling even at the age of 8 years old. I was thinking about what is going to happen to us now? Will they kill us now? I was full of fear. I thought the white man was going to kill me because my skin was black. I would not go to sleep, the fear of the white people wouldn't leave me alone. For days I stayed in the house with my mother, seeing more tears roll down her face day in day out. My thoughts were that the white man that killed Dr. King is going to hell for killing our leader that black leader of the black people. He killed the body but not the soul.

My feelings were pain so much pain. Sadness to know that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed by bad white people who hated black people that wanted to have peace and freedom. Hoping we shall overcome one day.

When I interviewed this mother, she said:

This assignment helped me to improve my writing. It gave me the courage to try the GED for the third time and I passed!

I typed up the Martin Luther King essay and I entered it into a contest and I was the grand prize winner. You not only helped my son you helped me. I thought well, she asked the parents to do this and this is my practice essay here. Shoot, it gave me the courage to write an essay. When you asked me to do that my mind went all the way back. I remember the names. I'm good. It inspired me so much. I thought if she can give these 4th graders this assignment, I'm 32 and I can do it too!

I stayed up until 3 o'clock in the morning. I said to myself this is what I am going to write about.

I cried ... all this is happening again. My mother working for the white folks. It hurted me all these memories. I will never forget.

I want to be a writer. I said, "God give me the strength. You can give me the third eye."

At first I put it aside but said, "No I am going to this for my child. My mom couldn't read or write but I can. So, I'm going to do it for both my mom and my son."

My son has a book on Martin Luther King that he takes to bed every night. I asked him to let me look at it. He said, "No, you have to think about it." My boyfriend took the book home that night. I started to write. I wrote a paragraph and then I cried. I wrote another paragraph and cried.

I brought back all those memories. My mom was helping hold us together while working for those white folks. They called us "Nigger." Nigger isn't a certain person.

I couldn't have done it if you hadn't inspired me. I wrote it to my son and he and I talked about it. He asked me to read it to him. He asked, "Did that really happen?"

I said, "Yes. Here today black and white kids play together. Blacks and whites get married. But not back then in Mississippi. It's part of our history."

I read it to my class. I had tears as I read and people cried. It made my best friend remember things that had happened to her. At the end of the reading I trembled and said, "Why?" I felt like this man gave us something to grow on. He set us free. It's still happening, but we cannot let them tell us.

Ms. Chin you are the reason I won this award. I never thought I could do this. You don't know it but you are my teacher.