

# **Knowledge Notebooks:What Happens When Students Write About Their Learning at the End of Each Day?**

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**Year One, 2000-2001**

Learning Logs have always fascinated me. I have heard many teachers refer to their use of learning logs and the various ways they use them. I have even attempted to incorporate them into my classroom but have not been satisfied with these attempts. How can I effectively use a Learning Log in my classroom? The answer had always alluded me.

This year I again wanted to try to utilize Learning Logs. When I reflected on my past experiences with Learning Logs I determined what would be my simplest objective for using them this year: Using their best writing skills, the students would retell the experiences of their day and what they had learned from them. Believing that students write better when they know their writing will be shared with an audience, even an audience of one or two, I decided my students would write daily in marble composition books that would go home for parents to read. Their writing would be in letter form and I would check it before they left school each day. Satisfied with this plan I decided I needed a catchy name for the Learning Logs. Inspired by their main purpose, I called them Knowledge Notebooks.

I wrote a letter to the parents explaining the procedure for using the Knowledge Notebook and glued it into the front of each composition book. The letter explained my three goals for incorporating this activity into our daily routine. First, I wanted the students to review the lessons of the day and comprehend the knowledge they had gained. Should they have difficulty in remembering the day's lessons, I hoped they would be motivated to pay greater attention the next day. Secondly, as the year progressed I hoped to see improvement in each student's writing ability. Finally, but just as important, I hoped to generate an informative conversation between parent and child each day. I didn't require a comment from parents but did encourage it in addition to their signature. I also stated that the notebook would be graded each day for content, grammar and punctuation.

The students began writing in their Knowledge Notebooks in late September. The only specific directions I gave them were how to fill out the page (letter form) and that they were to write about at least one thing they had learned that day. By not restricting them too much I felt I would see better examples of their natural writing ability at that time. As students finished their entries they brought them to me to be checked. While it took time, I enjoyed reading each student's book. At first I

did not correct any mistakes but reversed that decision after a couple of weeks. I did this for two reasons. First, I felt it important for the students to be corrected in their grammar and punctuation as well as their facts or they might repeat them. I also felt that it was important to give the parents an example of what I was doing at school.

I first modeled the type of entry I wanted everyone to make. I showed the correct form for a letter and demonstrated what might be written after finishing the day's lessons. Many students followed the direction to write at least one thing they had learned during the day. Unfortunately some would write one sentence and quit. Other students wanted to write for a longer period of time. It was difficult to pull these students away from their writing in order to pack up and catch their buses. Still others would write two to four sentences but not elaborate very much. As time went by I began writing questions in some notebooks or prompts to get them to write a little more about their day. I found that parents followed my lead and wrote notes back to their children which asked questions. Students were allowed to reference their math books to help them recall the lesson or look at any papers they had completed. I did find that I was having to remind them of what we had done more often than I would have like to. However, patterns have occurred in behavior and production. I know who is eager to write, who puts it off and who writes volumes as well as who writes as little as possible. If I had had more time it could have become a rich instructional moment of my writing instruction.

Because of the time it took to check all of the books on a daily basis, I changed my procedure in November to checking only half of the books each day. I gave everyone a number and would then check the odd numbered books on one day and the even numbered books the next. This was at the suggestion of my student teacher. As I was in my first year with the knowledge notebook and we were pressed for time I decided to try this suggestion. I also decided it was not necessary to record a grade for the grammar, punctuation, and content each day because I could review them at the end of each nine week period in order to get a grade. Predictably, it did cut down on the time needed to check the books but I feel in retrospect that I have missed something by not responding to the students each day.

In January I began to feel that not all of the students were putting as much effort into their writing as I wanted. They were including comments about recess, other students, and events at home. While I didn't want to limit them as to what they could write about, I did want them to include comments about their learning. I also became dissatisfied with the increasing amount of times I saw inaccurate facts written down. The few seconds I took to correct their inaccuracies became mini-tutoring sessions. I decided to give them new directions to try to direct them toward the outcome I had intended. Thinking back on another written lesson response activity I decided to use the method of asking students to write one fact or skill they had learned, one question they had, and one interesting observation they had made. This proved to be difficult. After struggling for several days, I

surveyed the class and found they thought it much easier to respond without the three writing guides. It was clear to me that even though some of them had unbeknownst to themselves actually been following this plan, they didn't understand it when it was explained to them. I returned to the original directions and asked them to write about what they had learned before adding anything else about their day. There seemed to be a renewed excitement about writing once the restrictions had been loosened.

The main problem we encountered was time. It has remained a constant struggle to give students enough time to write at the end of each day. If I ended a particularly rich lesson with the opportunity to write it often resulted in more time than I had allotted for the response. Students finished at different times which delayed the beginning of the next lesson and some also wanted to conclude their writing by signing their names and then not write the rest of the day. I often felt that this was a result of wanting to be done with a task those students didn't particularly relish. Having tried to integrate writing in the Knowledge Notebook at different times of the day I finally made the decision in March to continue writing only at the end of the day. On days when we were rushed I would ask students to write in their notebooks at home. I didn't like doing this but I was afraid of breaking the habit of writing daily and the students didn't seem to mind writing at home. Only occasionally would someone return the next day without having written an entry.

Overall I feel that this type of Learning Log has been a success. I have watched the students incorporate more information into their writing. I also have seen more personal feelings come out in their writing from time to time. A survey of the students revealed that many thought they would become even better at telling about their learning should they continue a book of this type into fourth grade. I'm still puzzled over the number of times I taught letter form, date form and corrected spelling and still saw errors with all three show up in their writing as if they had never been instructed in these areas. Checking their own work is still an area they do not regard as their responsibility. I will explore this next year.

I was extremely pleased with the involvement of most parents. Many wrote notes everyday to their child. Some were very positive, some asked questions of their child, while others pointed out areas that needed to be improved. All notes were written to the students. I never received any messages. I did receive verbal compliments on this activity. Parents commented by saying what a great record of the students' learning this would be and what a great keepsake. The students concurred during the survey. They are happy to have this record of their learning.

I will repeat this activity next year. I may try to keep a record of what subjects/lessons prompt the best responses. I will also try to integrate the writing into the day. The student survey responses indicated a strong preference for writing throughout the day rather than at the end of the day. They also liked the books being checked every other day. They felt this kept a long line from forming

when waiting to have their notebooks checked. As I mentioned earlier, I did like reading the notebooks daily but see the practical need to cut down on the time to check the books.

After another year of using the Knowledge Notebooks, I believe I may garner other ideas for written responses. Everyone benefited from this activity; the students, the parents, and myself. Around the month of January I began to question the necessity of the Knowledge Notebook. However, now that we are at the end of the school year I see the potential for it and am eager to explore other possibilities.

## **Year two, 2001-2002**

### **The Question**

In September of 2000 I began a project called the 'Knowledge Notebook'. The Knowledge Notebook is a marble composition book in which the students write daily notes to their parents telling them about the day's lessons and events and what they have learned. Parents can write back to their child but are required to sign under each daily note from their child. I can see the growth in a student's learning in all areas by assessing his/her writing ability and the content of his/her notes. Is he/she excited about a particular lesson? Did he/she give examples of what he/she had learned? Did he/she use good grammar, sentence structure, correct capitals and correct punctuation? Last year the project was an overall success with students and parents and fulfilled the objectives I had set for the Knowledge Notebook in the fall.

In addition to writing about the topics studied and what they had learned, many of the students drew pictures or wrote definitions related to the day's lessons. With the exception of only one or two students, parents wrote back to their children on a near daily basis. I was pleased with the additional insight the notebooks gave me into each student's writing strengths and weaknesses as well as his/her reactions to the day's lessons. It had also served as an efficient and effective way to keep each parent informed of his/her child's activities at school on a daily basis.

Inspired by the positive outcome of last year's Knowledge Notebook project, I decided to incorporate this activity into my curriculum again this year. I had some reservations because of the time element that had plagued me throughout the previous year. Students needed the time to write without being rushed. Could I accomplish this bit of time management on a daily basis once again? I decided to try once more to see if the success of the previous year could be repeated.

### **A Different Environment**

The previous year the third grade had been located in the school building, however this year we were situated in small trailers behind the school. Space was limited and my management was vastly affected by the logistics of this arrangement. The previous year I had room for many parent volunteers which meant opportunities for reteaching and enrichment. This year there was no classroom work areas that would accommodate a group without causing a constant distraction to the whole room. Movement between the building and the trailer was time consuming so as a result I rarely used parent volunteers. Because of this I had to change the way I taught many lessons and how and when we did hands-on activities. Time is usually an enemy of the elementary school teacher but this year it seemed to be even more of a problem. How was I going to schedule ample time for the students to write detailed notes to their parents?

Writing at least twice a day were implications from last year's study. Reflecting on the time issues of last year and projecting ahead to what might be the time and management issues of our new location, I determined that students would be able to write about their morning lessons during the mid morning bathroom break (10:10 A.M.). Students could easily take their notebooks and pencils with them for writing in the hallway while waiting for their turn for a break. Students would have another chance to write during the Language Arts block in the afternoon and/or during the ten minutes prior to packing up to go home. I briefly considered asking everyone to write for several minutes after each lesson, but determined that this practice might cause too many disruptions in transition from one lesson to another due to the different rates at which students write. I constantly assessed my plans looking for any five or ten minute opportunity to give my students time to write in their notebooks. I hoped the opportunities for writing I had planned would relieve the time crunch that was so often felt last year at the end of the day.

In late fall I gave the students a package of the very small sticky notes to keep on their desks or just inside their desks. I told them they could use these to write down words or phrases to help them remember anything they wanted to put in their Knowledge Notebook later. This was an attempt to help those who frequently asked "What did we do?" Several students latched on to this idea and were still using it at the end of the school year.

### **Data Collection**

The main source of data was the students' Knowledge Notebooks. Assessment of their writing strengths and weaknesses was ongoing and often redirected plans for the next few Language Arts blocks of time.

In January I surveyed my current students and their parents as well as last year's students and their parents. My reason for surveying last year's students and parents was to discover if the Knowledge Notebook had any lasting value beyond

the third grade school year. From this year's students and parents I was hoping to assess the current status of the Knowledge Notebooks's purpose and assess whether or not I needed to change the format or leave everything as it was for the time being. I also surveyed my current students once again in April to learn if they were glad to have a record of their third year activities and why they thought I had asked them to keep the notebook. I also wanted to know if they would welcome the opportunity to continue writing to their parents next year in fourth grade. Data also came from my schedule as I assessed the use of time for writing each day.

#### January Survey : Former Students and Parents

The survey of former students and their parents proved to be inconclusive due to the low number of surveys that were returned. Of those that did respond, all but one student indicated he/she had enjoyed writing in their Knowledge Notebooks and thought the record of their learning was fun to look back on and showed how they had improved throughout the school year as well as during their fourth grade year. All parent responses were positive. Every parent commented that the Knowledge Notebook gave them a starting point from which to ask about their child's day without having to "give him the third degree".

#### January Survey: Current Student and Parents

Of the 25 surveys that went home to my current students and their parents, nineteen were returned. Parents were asked three questions. The questions and a summary of the responses are as follows:

1. What benefits do you feel parents can receive from reading their child's Knowledge Notebook each night?

The benefit mentioned by more than half of the parents who responded was the opportunity to know what topics the students covered each day. Other benefits seen by parents were the aid in starting conversations with their children about day, seeing progress in use of correct grammar, spelling and comprehension of skills taught knowing what their child was thinking, 'what was in her head', and knowing what kind of day their child had .

2. Do you regularly comment in your child's Knowledge Notebook? Why or why not?

Fifteen parents responded that they either regularly respond or sometimes respond to their child's writing. Their reasons for responding include taking the opportunity to communicate with their child; showing their child that they think what he/she is learning is important; letting their child know that they value what they have to say; modeling the behavior they would like their child to imitate; and showing that they are paying attention to what their child has to say. Another

parent commented that he tries to ask questions to get his child thinking about what he/she have learned.

Several parents commented that they did not regularly comment in their child's Knowledge Notebook. Reasons given included not feeling it was necessary because they were able to have a good conversation with their child because of what he/she had written; they are usually in a hurry; their child gives them the notebook just before going to school; and they're not sure their child pays attention to what they write.

3. In what ways has reading your child's Knowledge Notebook changed your perception of how your child learns?

More than half of the parents responded that rather than changing their perception of how their child learns the Knowledge Notebook told them more about what their child was learning, especially in the area of writing and it's mechanics. One parent responded, "We believe in a hands-on child-centered approach to learning. We also feel that responsibility should have ownership---the notebook supports our beliefs. "

The survey of my current students also consisted of three questions. The questions and responses are as follows:

1. What do you like most about writing in your Knowledge Notebook?

The overwhelming response from the students was getting to write to my parents. Some interesting comments included:

- I get to remember stuff when I write.
- You can write as much as you want.
- Instead of telling my parents about what I did that day I show them my Knowledge Notebook
- You tell your parents what you are doing in school, not by telling them with your voice.
- I like writing in my knowledge Notebook because you get to talk to your mom and dad through writing.

2. What is the hardest part about writing in your Knowledge Notebook?

More than half of the students responded that the hardest part about writing in their Knowledge Notebook was remembering the day and deciding what to write. A few students also mentioned that time was a problem because they often did not get to finish writing before they had to stop.

3. I you think the Knowledge Notebook activity could be different tell how you would change it?

The responses to this question were very mixed. Five of the nineteen responded that they would not change the Knowledge Notebook at all. Four students suggested a longer writing time or breaking up the writing time so they could remember their day better. Other responses suggested writing about other topics rather than what they had learned that day. Suggested topics included:

- What they had not learned
- Weekend activities
- Favorite things
- What they were going to do when they got home

#### April Survey: Current Students

The survey in April was to assess how the students felt about the Knowledge Notebook requirement now that the year was almost over and they had a record of all they had learned and in some cases a collection of notes from their parents. The question and responses are as follows:

1. Now that school is almost over are you glad you have this book of notes to your parents to keep as a record of your third grade year? Why or why not?

Only a few students reported that they did not like writing in their Knowledge Notebook. Two said they did not like writing and one said he/she did not like writing at the end of the day. The rest of the students liked writing and most gave responses indicating they think the notebook will be a good reminder of their time in third grade:

- Yes, Because if I didn't have it I would of had to remember everything and I'll end up skipping things.
- Yes, because I can remember things from third grade that I learned. And I could read about the days when I was in third grade!
- Yes, because my mom will always know what happened on that day.
- Yes, I do like writing in the Knowledge Notebook because when you get older you might want to look back in the years and see all the good and bad days you had in your life.
- Yes, because if I want to remember what I did in third grade I could just look in my Knowledge notebook and remember every thing I did in the third grade.
- I am glad because when I am older I can remember my third grade life.
- I am glad to have a Knowledge Notebook because when I'm older I can read what I did in third grade. My parents like it because it is kind of like a journal.
- I am glad I have this book because the notes will remind me of good times I had in third grade.
- Yes, because it tells me what I did in third grade so like in twenty years I can always look back at it.

2. Do you think this is something you would like to do in fourth grade if your teacher next year asked you to do it? Why or why not?

Twenty out of twenty-seven students responded they would like to continue writing about their day. Many responses included the wish to have a record of their fourth grade year. Many also said they would be learning exciting things next year and would want to write about them.

- Yes, because I like to write and it will help me get better at my handwriting.
- So I can tell about all the new friends. I can tell them (parents) the new things I learned.
- Yes, because you might want to look back in that year and see how your handwriting was and see how it improved or not.
- Yes, because I will take time to think of what I did.
- Yes, because I am gonna have exciting things to do and might forget to tell my mom about it.
- Yes, because in fourth grade you will do more stuff and so you can write more about all the exciting things and writing is good for you and you can write in cursive and you will learn better.
- Yes, because it helps me know what has happened and it let's my parents know. It is also fun writing in your knowledge Notebook. It helps me remember how I wrote and what I did.
- Sure, because you could have more memories to laugh at.
- Yes,...if my mom asks me what I did today I won't have to remember because I will tell her to read my Knowledge Notebook.

There were some interesting comments from the students who wrote they either didn't want to continue writing in fourth grade or they were undecided. Here are a few of those responses:

- I would like to do this but I don't want for my parents to sign it. I just want to keep a record of the year!
- Yes and no. Yes because I will be able to look at all the things we did. No because if we didn't do it there would be more time to learn new things.
- No and yes. No because sometimes we're always rushing to write in it and yes because you can look back on stuff from that year.
- No, probably not because you probably want some free time besides recess to talk.
- No, because if you do it over and over again what is the excitement out of it?

3. Why do you think I asked you to write in your Knowledge Notebook?

Most students correctly assumed one my objectives for the Knowledge Notebook. I did want them to write to their parents about their day. Some

students knew I was also reading their books to find out what they were learning. Others also said I wanted them to have a record of their year. Two students brought up a reason I had not considered but unconsciously had kept track of during the year and that was seeing if the students were being responsible for taking their Knowledge Notebook home along with their Assignment Notebook to be signed each evening and then returned. Responsibility was something I encouraged throughout the year but it was not one of the hoped for outcomes that motivated me to include the notebook in our daily plans.

A small portion of my data came from discussions I had with several of my parents this year where I mentioned that I was considering dropping the Knowledge Notebook from my plans this year because of the time issue. All of the parents responded that they enjoyed participating in this project with their child. All parents gave the opinion that I should continue the project. This was very encouraging and helped in the final analysis of the data collected.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

When the decision was made to continue this writing project into a second year, I wondered if I would see different results with a different class. In the final analysis I found that there were similar positive and negative findings from each year.

When analyzing the data I concentrated on the phrases and comments most often repeated by parents and students on the survey forms as well as comments from students when in the classroom and in their Knowledge Notebook letters.

An overwhelming portion of the surveys were positive and supported the use of the Knowledge Notebook. Communication between parent and child was the most important objective to me as I stated in the letter inside each notebook and I was most gratified to read that many parents viewed it in the same way. The list of reasons developed from the survey indicating what parents looked for when reading their children's notes guided me in modeling how to write about their lessons.

Students' comments were also overwhelmingly positive. More students this year than last year expressed a willingness to continue writing in fourth grade. I am deeply interested in trying to develop a way to interest those students who do not like writing at all. When checking Knowledge Notebooks I saw strong correlation between a student's interest in writing and a parent's consistency in responding when the responses were more positive than negative. Students of parents who wrote more negative notes showed less enthusiasm and effort toward writing in the Knowledge Notebook. Several parents write a note no matter how little their child had written to them.

The most interesting data collected were the reasons why parents wrote back to their children. In one form or another the fact that they think what their children are learning is important was the one comment that was repeated most often. Parents have encouraged, scolded, shared, given pep talks, asked questions and told of their love in their notes to their children. These notes not only helped the students stay on track they constantly reminded the teacher-researcher of what is her ultimate goal.

Time continued to be difficult to manage. The students did write regularly during the mid morning bathroom break (10:10 A.M.) but often were rushed in the afternoon. Because of this students began taking their Knowledge Notebooks to the early afternoon bathroom break (1:10 P.M.). This would mean they only needed five minutes or so to finish writing about their day just prior to packing up to go home. This made checking even half of the books difficult and because of the size of our room bottle necks would occur hindering movement in the classroom.

I also observed on many occasions that writing was difficult for a few. They tended to read what others were writing in the notebooks and managed to write only a sentence or two in their own notebooks. One factor that contributed to this problem was the proximity the students had to one another due to the fact that they had to sit side by side in the hall for each bathroom break. To have sent everyone in small groups from the trailers would have been much more time consuming and the impact on our academic schedule would have been much greater. If it had been possible to arrange the students with more space between them it may have diminished the level of distraction that existed for those students who found it difficult to begin and continue to write.

### **Implications for teaching**

An analysis of the students' writing through out the two years has lead me to conclude that the following statements must be considered in all writing activities no matter how small.

1. The students need time to write. The more time they have the more they are likely to write.
2. Students should be allowed to write first and correct second before a teacher looks at the work for the first time. Students who spend too much time trying to write perfectly the first time do not always write as freely as they might without the pressure to use correct grammar, spelling and capitalization from the onset.
3. Students need a purpose to write. This purpose can be to share with their parents or to write about the exciting lesson they had as an outlet for that excitement.

4. Students' writing notebooks also showed a slightly better effort in writing content and style when parents regularly responded in writing to their child.

Should the decision be made to continue this writing project next year time will not be as difficult to manage because our grade is being moved back into the school building. Therefore students will be able to remain at their desks while small groups take bathroom breaks. This will allow for more privacy when writing and also for greater stimulation from the classroom posters, books and work on display which will aid in deciding what to write. Checking books for errors, content, and progress should be easier to arrange as well. I have also considered collecting several books to review each evening to alleviate a rush as all and give me time to assess at leisure. Parents will still be asked to read and sign each letter. I plan to relate some of my findings during Back-to-School night next fall in hopes of motivating more parents to respond regularly.

Because these books were only used for communication between school and home and have been used somewhat informally when compared to other 'in class' writing which is evaluated during writing conferences, I would like to include the letters in the Knowledge Notebook in my English lessons next year.

I have asked a fellow third grade teacher who is planning to use the Knowledge Notebook next year if she would like to exchange short notes each day in our own Knowledge Notebooks. These notes would then be used in English lessons as pieces of work in which to find nouns, verbs, adjectives, compound words, sentences that can be joined into one, etc. The students would then be asked to look in their own Knowledge Notebooks and highlight those words or sentences which are examples of the day's English lesson. Practice of this kind would give greater ownership of their written work and possibly motivate the students to review and value the quality of their presentation piece.

### **Questions for further study**

- After two years of research and many positive results, there still remain two questions that have not been answered satisfactorily:
- When is the most appropriate and convenient time for a student to write?
- How can I more effectively integrate writing skills with the Knowledge Notebook?
- Will having the students use notes from their Knowledge Notebooks highlight their strengths and weaknesses in such a way that they will see they errors will be more easily?

Further insight into these questions is expected in the third year of this study.

**Year Three, 2002-2003: The Parents Respond.**

## **The Question**

During the 2002-2003 school year and the two preceding school years, I incorporated a writing activity into the curriculum where students wrote throughout the day about their learning experiences. It was my desire for my students to write meaningfully each day and to let parents know a little more about their child's day to day experiences in the classroom that led me to develop my own style of a student's daily journal. Each student's marble composition book in which he wrote was known as his 'Knowledge Notebook'. This school year was the final year of research on 'what happens when students write about daily learning'. Previously, research had been conducted on the students' progress in writing, retention of information and skills taught across the curriculum, and the effect that writing daily had on their motivation to write. This year I decided to focus my research on parent's responses to their child's daily entry and how they might effect how much a student writes and how much detail he would include.

## **Organization**

The Knowledge Notebooks were given out on the first day of school and used immediately. With the exception of only a handful of days, the students wrote in their Knowledge Notebooks everyday. During the first year of using the Knowledge Notebooks students would write a short letter to their parents at the end of each school day. Often this lead to rushing through without significant reflection on the day's learning and activities. The quality and length of the letters were not as good as it was anticipated they might be with only a few students exceeding expectations. These students included details about the skills and information introduced during the day as well as drawings or examples of work they had done.

The second year the third grade was moved out of the school building into trailers. This necessitated taking class trips to the indoor restrooms at least twice each day. Using this time to allow the students to write gave them the opportunity to reflect on a smaller portion of the day and ten to fifteen minutes to write. Students were then able to finish writing to their parents prior to packing up at the end of the school day. The quality and length of the letters of most students were noticeably better when compared to the previous class' entries the year prior.

This year the third grade classes were moved back into the school building. Given the positive results of planned writing breaks I continued to schedule them as before. The first break was at approximately 10:00 in the morning when students were sent out in groups for a bathroom visit. The other break was at approximately 1:00 in the afternoon when another bathroom visit was given. At these times, which usually occurred at the end of a lesson and upon returning from lunch, students who remained in the classroom where asked to take out their Knowledge Notebooks and begin writing about their most recent activity and what they had done/learned. Further time was also given when the opportunity arose. Many times when they had to wait on others to finish a test or other class assignment, students would use those few minutes to write in their Knowledge

Notebooks. By continuing to write during the planned writing breaks students could finish quickly before packing up which was often a hurried time.

Knowledge Notebooks were checked each morning for signatures. It was at this time that I could also review notes written by the students as well as by their parents. I kept a check sheet to record who had shown his book to his parents and also took notes on the individual student's writing progress.

### **Implementation and Data Collection**

With the first implementation of the Knowledge Notebook three years ago, I pasted a letter to parents in the front of each notebook to explain my objectives for using the Knowledge Notebooks and my daily expectations. I have continued this practice, refining the letter each year. A copy of this year's letter is included in this report. (Attachment A) Parents were asked to always sign beneath their children's letters and encouraged to write a brief message back to their children if they would like to do so.

As in the past, Knowledge Notebooks were handed out the first day of school and used immediately. I also modeled on this first day how to write a note to their parents. I began by writing two or three complete sentences during each break about our most recent lessons and activities. I would also quickly review the lessons and activities they had participated in prior to their beginning to write and encouraged them to include all that they remembered and wanted to relay to their parents. I would often write key vocabulary words on the chalkboard and refer to any posters, examples, or literature to which they could turn for inspiration. This was one important improvement over the previous year since the students were then removed from the classroom trailer to the school building during their writing breaks with no access to any prompts that were present in the room. Students last year did ask to take books and/or papers that would help them decide what to write. I would also help with spelling at this time.

Parents were formally introduced to the Knowledge Notebooks at Back to School Night which was held in the first month of school. In case parents had not read the letter pasted in the front, I reviewed the objectives and procedure and give an invitation for them to respond to their children's writing each evening or whenever possible.

Several times during the school year I took home the Knowledge Notebooks to review and write short notes to the students. During these reviews and while reading their entries each morning as I checked for parent signatures, I was able to ascertain areas which needed additional instruction. Sentence structure, punctuation, letter format, and capitalization were among the areas in most need of support.

Toward the end of the year I took a formal survey of the students' and parents' opinions of the Knowledge Notebook. I had also been guided by informal comments made by students and parents throughout the school year.

### **Observations**

As I reflected back on the implementation of the Knowledge Notebooks with this year's students, I began to recall changes I had made in other areas of the curriculum that may have impacted the outcome of this year's Knowledge Notebook use.

I noted that I had stressed the use of complete sentences earlier in the school year and more strictly than usual when writing sentences using spelling words in homework assignments. I also restructured parts of my English instruction which coincided well with this objective. I referred regularly to sentence structure (sense, subject, and predicate) in all areas of the curriculum and noticed an increasing improvement in the clarity of most students' notes to their parents half-way through the second quarter of the school year.

I noted also that I was more aware of vocabulary that I used both related to the subject matter and also those words which are part of my natural vocabulary. Though I have always defined new vocabulary words to my students when introduced in the classroom, I realized that this year I wrote definitions on the chalkboard more frequently and also labeled examples I wrote or drew in more detail. I know these were conscious efforts on my part to motivate my students to write by putting before them the words which they might stumble over in their writing and which were needed in order to explain the lesson or activity we had done. I didn't know exactly the impact this was having until I began to see parent responses which included questions or comments using the same vocabulary words they had read in their children's writing.

This year I also observed more of a desire to write in the Knowledge Notebooks than I had previously witnessed in prior classes. It will only be through observation of future classes that I will know if this will be repeated due to my efforts or if it will be entirely a student's motivation to write regardless of what I have or have not done. I was often surprised when I had to repeat my request for the students to finish up their notes and return their Knowledge Notebooks to their desks. I was also often pleasantly surprised when students would ask if they could write in their Knowledge Notebooks when they had a few minutes during a transition time. Questions such as "can I write this in my notebook?" were often heard and unscheduled time was often given when it was evident that the students wanted to record the information they had just learned, give details about an activity we had just completed, or tell about an assembly they had attended moments before.

During the first week of this school year, a question arose from one student who was living in a home where she and her older sister were the only ones who spoke English. She asked if her sister who was in eighth grade could write to her instead. Her father who spoke English and was not available to comment during the week would see her notebook on the weekends. I quickly agreed because I wanted her to exercise her use of English and to keep up her enthusiasm for writing. Sharing this daily assignment has ended up being a bonding activity for the two girls. They have faithfully answered each other's notes and written of how much they enjoy communicating in this way.

Late in the school year I realized that I had been saving my letter writing unit when I could have taught it earlier in the school year. It is a short unit and may have helped some students who were still struggling with the letter writing format as late as April. Though I had reviewed the format many times it is possible that more concentrated time on it may have helped to cement the outline for those who struggled the longest. Teaching this unit earlier is one change I will make in the upcoming school year.

The last observation I want to relate is that of seeing so many parents write a paragraph or more to their children. Some parents wrote as much as a page or more at times. One parent even glued in a few family pictures so his child could look at them and feel close to his family after the child had made a comment about missing his family while at school. It was touching to see parents share moments from their childhood, encourage their child to do well on an upcoming test, remind their child of how much he is loved, share their own day with their child, and see the questions and answers that went back and forth in their writing. These were truly some of the best responses I had seen from parents.

### **Findings**

The findings of this research are based on notes taken during readings of the students' Knowledge Notebook entries, their parents responses or lack of response in their children's Knowledge Notebook, and the responses of parents and students to the survey questions asked during May of this year.

#### *Parent Survey*

As with the evolving parent letter, the surveys, too, have changed over the past three years. The parent survey underwent the greatest change in format. The old survey had four to six short answer questions and covered the front and back of a single sheet of paper. This year I designed a survey that included five statements to which parents circled numbered responses that ranged from 'Strongly Agree' (1) to 'Strongly Disagree' (5). These were followed by two short answer questions. By shortening the survey to one page I hoped to have a greater number of surveys returned in a shorter amount of time. This is exactly what happened.

The answers to the statements and questions on both surveys were evaluated for content relating to the following areas: satisfaction with the Knowledge Notebook and its place in our third grade classroom; parent responses and the students' thoughts on them. The statements and the results of the parent survey sent home in May are as follows: (22 out of 25 parents responded)

1. The Knowledge Notebook was a good way to learn about my child's school day.

The Knowledge Notebook received a positive response with ten parents responding 'Strongly Agree', seven responding 'Agree', and the remaining five parents responding with neutrally (3). This response agrees with the previous survey of past parents who also

indicated their agreement in the value of the notebook as a tool for learning more about their children's school experiences. It is interesting to note that of the five neutral responses, four of them came from parents who responded regularly in their child's Knowledge Notebook. Considering the time and effort these parents put into responding almost daily, it seemed that their efforts would have reflected a definite belief in the positive value of the Knowledge Notebook activity.

2. The letter in the front of the Knowledge Notebook clearly explained the purpose of the notebook.

With 15 parents responding 'Strongly Agree', the letter seems to explain the objectives sufficiently. Six parents marked 'Agree' while only one parent remained neutral. With this strong acknowledgment the letter will probably remain intact for the coming school year.

3. The Knowledge Notebook will be a good keepsake for my child to have as a reminder of his/her third grade year.

Twelve parents responded 'Strongly Agree', six parents marked 'Agree', three were neutral, and one parent marked 'Disagree'. Unfortunately the one parent who marked 'Disagree' did not respond to the two short answer questions which might have shed light on his response to this statement.

4. My child's notes prompted daily discussion on his/her day at school.

The responses to this statement were spread out among the choices. Eleven parents felt 'Strongly Agree' reflected their experience with their children in this area. Three parents marked 'Agree', while six were neutral and two marked 'Disagree'. Because both parents who marked 'Disagree' chose to identify themselves, it is understandable why they responded as they did. One child had a negative view of writing for any purpose and both students were easily distracted and could not focus for very long. Their entries usually consisted of one or two sentences that did not always relate to the lesson topics of the day. I was surprised by one of these parent's comments because his child improved in his daily writing by the spring and was quite proud of his entries.

5. A sample of a parent's response at the beginning of the year would have helped me to know how to respond to my child's notes.

Only four parents responded 'Strongly Agree'. Two of them were from the group that responded daily to their children while the other two were from the group that only signed or responded infrequently. Two parents responded 'Strongly Disagree' and they were again split between the two groups. Five parents marked 'Agree', five were neutral and six marked 'Disagree'. Because of the range of responses chosen for this statement it would be interesting to include a sample response for the parents next year during the Back to School Night presentation and ask this question once again on the end of the year survey. Would the responses become more polar and if so would they be more positive or negative?

These five statements above were followed by two short answer questions. The questions and a summary of the responses given are as follows:

6. What do you feel is or could be the greatest value of the Knowledge Notebook?

It was interesting to note that three of the seven who normally do not respond did not respond to this question. Of the 15 who usually respond daily to their children's notes only one did not answer this question.

The responses were varied and positive. A sample of the responses indicating the perceived value of the Knowledge Notebook include:

- Can cultivate young peoples' desire and talent for writing
- Children learn to express feelings in writing and put thoughts on paper
- Encouragement to write, practice/improve writing skills
- Spelling practice
- Helps children to use their memory
- Gives examples of child's progress to the parent
- Parents are aware of what their child did that day
- Gives parents the opportunity to watch their children grow and mature
- The Knowledge Notebook documents the year
- Something children can always treasure
- Provides communication between parent and child
- Child feels special because they get a note from their parent
- Gives a focus point for (the parent) because it is a daily reminder of responsibility to review homework and discuss school

These comments support the previous finding that parents do support the use of the Knowledge Notebook because of the value they see in its inclusion in our curriculum.

The last question on the parents' form was altered to give two different surveys that would each identify with one of the two groups of parent responses I regularly observed. (Attachments B and C) The two questions and a sample of the responses are as follows:

7. (A) (Included on the form sent to parents who responded with notes to their children almost daily) Thank you for responding daily in your child's Knowledge Notebook. What tips can you give me to share with parents next year to encourage them to respond daily?

Of the fifteen parents who returned the form with this question, three chose not to respond. While parents wrote suggestions on how to encourage parents to respond more, they also included their feelings about responding. All were very positive and encouraging. The following are taken from some of the responses received:

- I would hope that parents don't need encouragement to support their children, but I know we all get busy and sometimes overlook what's really important.

- That your child loves and appreciates your input as a parent. As you know \_\_\_\_\_'s Knowledge Notebook allowed all of us to truly recognize his cry for help. \_\_\_\_\_ knows his father and I care about him enough to write a couple of sentences.
- Maybe after so many responses (a week or a month) give something special to the kids (something fun that helps them learn like a book or story) so the kids encourage the parents.
- Parents need to respond daily to show the children the importance of following through with assignments. The children learn their habits from the parents. Remind the parents of that!
- Tell parents that sometimes kids have trouble expressing their feelings, and writing them down in a notebook may be a great solution. This way, they are able to write down their thoughts and reflect on them later on during the school year. I believe parents should give up a minute or two of their day and read into the wonderful thought of their kids. (Comment from older sister)
- Encourage them to ask for specific details on daily subjects early on.
- Encourage them (the parents) often to write more than 2 or 3 sentences.
- That parental involvement in the daily education of their child is crucial.
- Read the Knowledge Notebook first thing.

One parent had a comment that wasn't exactly positive or negative:

- For some reason my boy didn't enjoy writing about his day unless something exciting happened. Skip the Knowledge Notebook and give more reports.

It is again interesting to note that this parent is one who did not respond in his child's notebook on a regular basis. The question then is, 'would his child have been more motivated to write if the parent had taken the time to respond to his daily notes?' Toward the spring this particular child did show more motivation to write and would often show me how much he had written. His efforts greatly improved and the content of his letters was much clearer with more detail about the day's events. Because of this I was also a little puzzled over his parent's comment.

7. (B) (Included on the form sent to parents who only signed their names or only occasionally wrote notes back to their children) Some notebooks had daily responses and some did not. My goal is for each student to have a response each day. What could I do to help assist parents in responding?

The five responses to this question that were received from this group gave me information, ideas and more questions. Two parents suggested incorporating two improvements which are already either done in the classroom or encouraged to be done at home. One suggestion was to have the students write a few minutes out of the day at the same time which is what we do when it is time for our bathroom break. The other suggestion was to have students talk to their parents about their day. Both of these suggestions were actually discussed at Back to School Night and/or covered in the letter in the front of the Knowledge Notebook.

One parent responded that it was 'hard to write down similar responses every day.' This comment adds purpose to the idea of providing a sample response for parents at the beginning of the school year. If this one parent had seen how to draw his responses from the information written in his child's note then it may not have been so hard for him to respond.

The last response suggested skipping asking parents to respond because they are too busy; 'sometimes we run late and read it, sign it and go onto other items that need to be addressed.' While it seems this parent has missed one of the purposes of the Knowledge Notebook (encourage communication between parent and child), his comment gives way to the possibility of asking parents to respond each weekend if they find responding daily to be too time consuming. Flexibility has always been an important element in fitting the Knowledge Notebook around the needs and ability of the students and their parents. There is also the question of whether this parent took time to talk with his child about the day. If so, did the Knowledge Notebook letter help?

The responses given by the parents were both supportive and enlightening and will be used when considering changes in the use of the Knowledge Notebook next year.

### *Student Survey*

My students had always been surveyed once during the middle of the school year and again at the end of the year. Due to bad weather and extended snow days I was not able to prepare the new survey I intended to use in time for it to reflect the students' opinions halfway through this school year. When preparing the new end of the year student survey to be administered in May I gave the new set of six short answer questions to everyone. (Attachment D)

Below are the six end of the year student survey questions and some examples of the responses given for each question:

1. Do you think the Knowledge Notebook is a good way to tell your family what you've learned and done in school each day?

- Yes, because I can tell my parents about my day in the Knowledge Notebook and they can write something in it and I like reading their notes.
- Yes, because my parents can learn what we are learning about so if I have trouble with something they know what we are learning.
- Yes, because my mom always asks me what I did in school today and I just give her my Knowledge Notebook so I never have to answer her question.
- Yes, so we can review my writing skills and so they are aware of what I am doing.
- Yes, because I can tell what I did each day. My sister can tell me about her day. It is a little easy to talk with my sister with the Knowledge Notebook
- Yes, because then you don't have to tell when you get home or you don't have to tell them everything you did and you won't get frustrated.

- I thought it was a thing to do so your parents could know about your day and if it was interesting.

## 2. What do you like about writing in your Knowledge Notebook?

I get to see the letters that sometimes my parents write to me. Being able to tell my mother or father what I did at school. Being able to tell your parents that you learned.

- I like my knowledge notebook because when I'm writing to my parents, it's like writing to a pen pal.
- You get to write in cursive.
- Because normally my mom writes to me.
- I like to write, period. I'd write anything in there if I could. I love to write. What I like about writing in the Knowledge Notebook is English.
- I'm glad we even have a Knowledge Notebook because I love to write to my parents.

## 3. What do you like least about writing in your Knowledge Notebook?

- Your parents don't write back to you.
- I just like writing in my Knowledge Notebook. I don't like anything the least in my Knowledge Notebook.
- I don't get to finish my snack most of the time when I'm writing in it.
- You can't write to your cousins.

## 4. Do you like it when your parents write to you in your Knowledge Notebook? Why or why not?

- Yes, because then I can read the notes they wrote to me.
- Not really because they don't always write.
- Yes, because they comment and ask questions that you can answer the next day.
- Yes, because I know that she saw the note I wrote.
- No, because when she writes back she asks me questions and sometimes they are hard.
- Yes, because I like what they write.
- Yes, because I would like to see if they think I did good on a test, or because they think my handwriting is good.
- BUT THEY DON'T!!!!
- I do because I like them to ask me questions about my day.
- Yes, they tell you if you did a good job.
- I liked when your parents would write back because they could tell you about their day and they could tell you what they were interested in about your day.
- I like it because then I can write more when she writes questions.
- Yes, because I don't get much mail so it's a good thing I have the Knowledge Notebook.
- Yes, because it shows they love me.

- Yes, I do like it when my dad writes to me in my Knowledge Notebook because then I know about some of his day too.
- Yes, because it lets me know that my parents are reading what I write.
- I do like it when my mom/dad writes in there because they answer you.

The answers to question four were very revealing about the students' feelings when their parents do or don't respond to their writing. A response in their Knowledge Notebook is another form of attention. They have proof that their parents were thinking of them when Mom or Dad wrote a response back to them in their Knowledge Notebook. It is also clear from some of the responses that those students expect and are looking forward to the note they will get from their parents. It seems that the students are aware of their parents' involvement in their education. The students know that their parents are watching their progress.

5. If your parents ask you questions in your Knowledge Notebook do you answer them in your next day's writing? Why or why not?

- Yes, I do, because if I don't she will ask me again.
- Yes, I will answer the question on the next page so my sister knows what happened.
- No, I just write the things we did.
- No, because I forget or I just don't want to answer them.
- Yes, so she knows what we are doing in school.
- I did because if it was something about your day then if you answer them they could get more information about your day.
- No, they really don't write to me.
- I do because I never like to keep asking me the same question.
- They used to and I didn't answer.
- They don't write back to me.
- Yes, because sometimes they write funny things.
- Sometimes, because most of the time I don't have enough time to answer them in the day.
- No, because sometimes I forget what she said.
- Yes and sometimes no. Well, they don't ask very many questions. They just comment.
- Yes, because I don't want them to keep waiting for my answer.

After reading the responses to question five I went back and compared the answers given to questions number four and five and was surprised to see that some of the students who loved getting responses, to include questions, from their parents said that they don't answer the questions. This will be an area to which I will give further study and emphasize more next year.

6. How can I make it easier for students to write in their Knowledge Notebooks next year?

- Tell them to write what happened and what is going to happen.
- It can be easier to make the Knowledge Notebook lighter and bigger lines on the paper.
- Make them answer their parent's questions and write 6 or 7 more sentences each day.
- Tell them if you write more than one page they get two pieces of candy. If they write half a page they get one piece of candy.
- Give them good, easy to use clues like 'in math we learned about division, in English we learned about quotation marks.'
- I would draw pictures.
- By maybe giving them more time to think about their day.
- By not writing in cursive, only in print.

It has always been interesting to read students' suggestions for improving the Knowledge Notebook. As in the above answers, many responses reflect a desire to not do the very practice that I hope will improve their ability to write clearly and concisely. Others will recommend a slightly comical approach to encourage reluctant writers or punish those who don't want to write. Then there are those who hit upon an area with an improvement that I had not previously thought of and be worth my consideration.

This year, however, I found several students making suggestions that reflect what I did this year. Were they oblivious to my comments and suggestions? This is somewhat puzzling to know that I did several of the suggestions daily and one or two students were not aware of what I was saying. Do I need to reevaluate my presentations? Should I have small groups throughout the year to discuss ideas and expectations for the use of the Knowledge Notebook? These two student comments seem to suggest it may be a supportive and necessary strategy to try next year.

### **Implications**

Though this is the third year of researching 'what happens when students write about daily learning', ten implications for its future use emerged. This confirms my personal feeling that the Knowledge Notebook is still evolving and will continue to evolve as my experience with it grows.

The implications for the Knowledge Notebooks use are as follows:

- The Knowledge Notebook letter should remain as it is with only minor changes if necessary.
- Share the significance of a parent's response with next year's parents at Back to School Night by showing them some of the parent and student survey responses from this year. Also include an example of a Knowledge Notebook letter and response.
- Ask parents to respond daily if possible or chose one or two days each week to respond regularly in their children's notebooks.

- Continue with the scheduled writing breaks during the day. Also continue with impromptu writing opportunities as they arise.
- Initiate having small groups for instruction or reinforcement after introduction of a new skill to help everyone see how it can be used in their letters. This would also offer support or those who are struggling or showing little effort in their attempts to write daily.
- Continue to emphasize the use of complete sentences throughout all areas of the curriculum early in the school year.
- Continue to model making Knowledge Notebook entries for the students. Teach letter writing unit earlier in the school year to provide better knowledge of letter structure.
- Create permanent vocabulary list for each subject. Fix in prominent place in the classroom for easy reference. Add words as they are introduced in the classroom.
- To provide opportunities for frequent evaluation of students' progress in their Knowledge Notebooks, begin taking three or four books home each evening after school or evaluating them during school hours if possible after the first week of school.
- Continue to survey parents and students at the end of the school year even though no formal research paper will be written. Rewrite questions to ask how parents respond most - in writing or through conversations at home with their children. Was the conversation easier because of what their children had written in their Knowledge Notebooks?

With these changes made in parent awareness, classroom procedures, curriculum schedule, and assessment the Knowledge Notebook will become a stronger tool for helping students actively practice their writing skills and communicate to their parents their continuing academic progress and success.

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## **Appendix**

(Attachment A)

September 3, 2002

Dear Parents,

You are holding your child's 'Knowledge Notebook'. Each day your child will write a note before he/she leaves school telling you about something he/she has learned during the day. Entries may contain an explanation of a new concept or a request for a parent's opinion, point of view, advice or explanation. The only thing I ask of you is to read the message, write a brief comment to your child beneath it if you would like to do so and then sign your name. A signature is required even if no comment is written. Parent

responses could include a question your child could respond to in the notebook, a response to a question asked by your child or a reflection about your child's learning.

There are several goals I hope will be achieved by incorporating this activity into our daily schedule. First, I would like the students to review the day's lessons and record the knowledge they have gained. Should they have difficulty in recalling facts and events I hope they will be motivated to pay greater attention the next day. Second, I hope to see improvement in each student's writing abilities. During some English lessons the students will be referred to their Knowledge Notebooks in order to find places where they have or could have used the English grammar, punctuation, and composition skills we will study this year. Notes will be assessed for progress in content, grammar and punctuation as part of their writing grade. Most importantly, I hope you'll enjoy reading about and discussing the major learning events of the day with your child.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Shekmer

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Below is a survey for parents who did not respond frequently:

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Please return survey to Mrs. Shekmer by Friday, May 2 (Attachment B)

1. The Knowledge Notebook was a good way to learn about my child's school day.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

2. The letter in the front of the Knowledge Notebook clearly explained the purpose of the notebook.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

3. The Knowledge Notebook will be a good keepsake for my child to have as a reminder of his/her third grade year.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

4. My child's notes prompted daily discussion on his/her day at school.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

5. A sample of a parent's response at the beginning of the year would have helped me to know how to respond to my child's notes.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

6. What do you feel is or could be the greatest value of the Knowledge Notebook?

7. Some notebooks had daily responses and some did not. My goal is for each student to have a response each day. What could I do to help assist parents in responding?

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This is a Survey for parents who responded frequently:

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Please return survey to Mrs. Shekmer by Friday, May 2 (Attachment C)

1. The Knowledge Notebook was a good way to learn about my child's school day.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

2. The letter in the front of the Knowledge Notebook clearly explained the purpose of the notebook.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

3. The Knowledge Notebook will be a good keepsake for my child to have as a reminder of his/her third grade year.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

4. My child's notes prompted daily discussion on his/her day at school.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

5. A sample of a parent's response at the beginning of the year would have helped me to know how to respond to my child's notes.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

1 2 3 4 5

6. What do you feel is or could be the greatest value of the Knowledge Notebook?

7. Thank you for responding daily in your child's Knowledge Notebook. What tips can you give me to share with parents next year to encourage them to respond daily?

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This is a Knowledge Notebook Survey for Students:

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Spring 2003

(Attachment D)

### **Knowledge Notebook Survey**

1. Do you think the Knowledge Notebook is a good way to tell your family what you've learned and done in school each day? Why or why not?
2. What do you like about writing in your Knowledge Notebook?
3. What do you like least about writing in your Knowledge Notebook?
4. Do you like it when your parents write to you in your Knowledge Notebook? Why or why not?
5. If your parents ask you questions in your Knowledge Notebook do you answer them in your next day's writing? Why or why not?
6. How can I make it easier for students to write in their Knowledge Notebooks next year?

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June 18, 2003.