

## CHAPTER 4

### EMILY

*"The ocean of truth lays open before us...largely undiscovered."*

-Albert Einstein

#### Toronto in the early morning

Dashing  
dashing  
quickly going

somewhere

nowhere

everywhere

Everybody joined  
in  
one dance –

dashing!<sup>1</sup>

I have learned much from Emily and, more importantly, I have much yet to learn. Emily is very capable and she continually amazes me by what she can do and how she sees the world. We often think of children as needing our protection and guidance; there is no denying that they do, but in the process we forget how capable they are, they are just inexperienced. Emily showed me time and time again that my parochial view of children as needing to develop through certain stages before they are capable of doing certain things was just wrong; she showed me that using just one literacy at a time is a linear adult approach to literacies use; and that we are communicative beings constantly making meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Poem by Emily age 10.

of the world around us. Emily has shown me literacies and much of what I have come to understand and believe; I then went to the theorists to understand and explain what I was being shown and taught. My understanding and literacies theory has grown largely out of her practice and this is the story of how Emily slowly taught me what she knows and understands about literacies and how they work.

Emily is a writer, dancer and reader, but the primary literacy she uses to create meaning and make sense of the world is writing (see figure 6). Emily has always been a writer; I recognized her as a writer when she was 2 ½ years old and I was capable of understanding her constant work as writing. This is not to say that she wasn't writing earlier, only that I failed to recognize her earlier work as writing.

It is often the misconception of adults that the work children do is less than the work of adults or that it is preparation for adult work, or even just the imitation of adult work. This is especially so when it comes to children's writing and I was not innocent of this representative mindset; that is until Emily pointed



**Figure 6: Emily Writing (age 6)**

out to me that I was wrong and that her work is writing and is just as important and valid as my grown-up writing.

### Emily as a Writer

Emily showed me that she was a writer and she used writing in powerful and transformative ways. She showed me that her writing was in fact more complex than adult writing. She often combined her writing with drawing, drama, dance, and oral story telling; blending the lines that define these literacies in their adult/conventional forms. She challenged my taken for granted notions of literacies as discrete sign forms.

I was so amazed by Emily's writing that I chose to study her writing for my Master's Research Paper. This study and the research finding changed the way I view and understand children's literacies but rather than reiterate the finding of that study I have gone back through the data to specifically answer the questions of this research study. I have chosen to continue to focus on Emily's writing because it is the primary literacy she uses to make and express meaning. For brevity I am looking closely at her use of writing as an example of how she uses literacies more generally. What follows is the story of Emily's writing. I have selected samples of her writing that both support her story as a writer and are representative of the major themes in her data.

### Emily's Writing before School

The research for my Master's thesis was looking solely at Emily's writing

before she started school, and at that time I was not aware of the connections she was making to other literacies.



**Figure 7:** <T> Tristan, <E> Emily, <C> Christine, <J> Jeffrey

Some of the connections were so blatant I couldn't miss them, like the connections between Emily's writing and her art, drama, or reading; but, with the exception of reading, I saw these as supports and not literacies. What should have been the most obvious blending of literacies, art and writing, I saw as interesting but not as complex (see figure 7). Emily used art and writing to convey complex



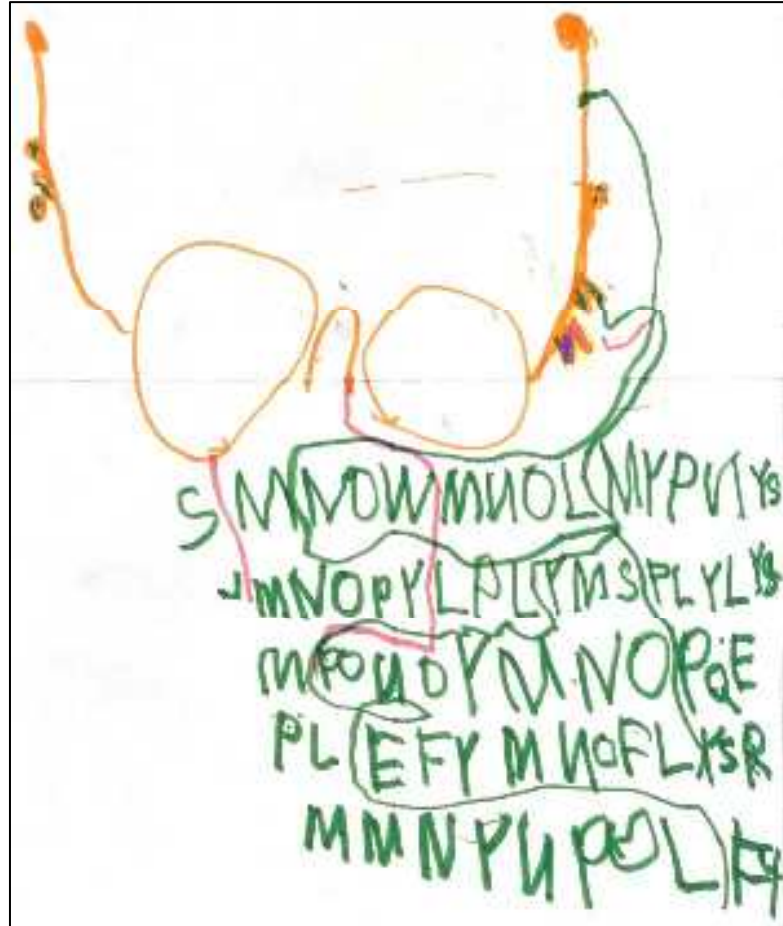
**Figure 8:** "Playing at the beach." (scribble mid-page)

concepts, integrating the two literacies into a single meaning making product (see figure 8). These two creations (see figures 7 & 8) have the text integrated within the picture. These samples are both representative of Emily's early work; in the first (figure 7) she is using the text, in this case the first initial of each person's name, to reinforce, or act as a reiteration, of the picture through labelling. In figure 8 she has embedded the text so that it is a part of the picture, presenting both as an integrated whole and offering no distinction between these two literacies (she added her name to the picture after she was finished); using both together to convey her ideas/story.

It is important to note that both these pictures/texts were accompanied by an oral retelling as well and were self produced by Emily (without request) and come out of her lived experience. In these two examples Emily is using drawing, writing, and oral story telling to express meaning in an integrated whole. She regularly used literacies as multiple and only started to distinguish between literacies as she started to share her work with wider audiences. She started to realize that adults she was sharing her work with were making a distinction between the drawing and writing, and were expecting the oral story to be representative not necessarily supportive. She also started to understand that these adults expected a separation between the drawing and writing (see figure 9). This was clearly Emily's understanding, but I think it is interesting that advertising, and other adult literacies, use multiple literacies to convey meaning effectively. It seems that this type of literacies use is considered sophisticated for adults but beyond the capabilities of children and not valued or encouraged. This

is not to say that Emily stopped using literacies as multiple but that she started to explore literacies as separate, while continuing to dialogue among different literacies.

Emily's writing during this time (before she started school at age 5) was a very social process. She constantly wrote and created art, dramas, dances, and music for others and to be shared with others. She was constantly interacting with her audience. Her understanding of writing moved toward a more conventional application in a short period of time (see figure 10) but this was not a linear progression or through preset stages of development.



**Figure 9: Design for glasses to resolve my colour-blindness. The parts listed in order (top to bottom):** Glasses / eye part / nose part / decoration / end part (with lines pointing to each part)



**Figure 10: I love you Papa**

Emily observed the adults and literacy users around her and developed her own schema of how literacies work (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). She often modified and developed her understanding of literacies, assimilating new information and discarding those features of her schema which no longer worked for her. She engaged in many practices which were very richly literate but which could have easily gone unnoticed or been misinterpreted. Emily integrated all the social messages she was receiving about writing and how literacies work. Emily's schema was at times deeply personal and at other times very conventional, or public; it would seem to depend on the function of Emily's literacies use. For Emily the literacies process was very social; and even her story writing, which was deeply personal, was often intended to be read aloud. For Emily literacies were about making meaning both personally and through social interaction.

### Our Family Practices that Supported Emily's Literacies Use

As was mentioned in chapter 3, between the time Emily was three and half until we moved to Indiana when she was five, Christine watched a friend's daughter, Miranda<sup>2</sup>, who was Emily's age. Because Christine was caring for Miranda at this time, and partly because she is a conscientious mother, Christine started to do some semi-formal preschool instruction with Emily and Miranda. Christine made a pocket chart with nine possible activities for the girls to choose and they had to choose to do three every day. These choices included a great

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<sup>2</sup> Miranda is a pseudonym, as are all the names in this thesis that do not belong to immediate family.



deal of play indoors and outdoors but also included a conscious effort to teach the girls the alphabet (see figure 11), numbers, to read with them daily, provide them with art supplies, and to take the girls on regular trips throughout our Toronto neighbourhood. The culture of the city readily supported this with “mom & tots” reading programs at the local library, many children’s learning activities at public community centres and cultural sites readily accessible on foot or by public transit.

This type of teaching was encouraged by myself, as a kindergarten teacher, and by

many of the parents Christine interacted with. This was what was seen as necessary for Emily and Miranda to succeed in school, which of course, they would both attend. Christine and I praised and encouraged Emily’s literacies uses. We delighted in her plays, art, and writing. We encouraged her and made sure she was well supplied with all the materials she needed. In some ways this was an incredibly supportive environment for Emily’s developing literacies understanding and use. But the reason for this support was the preparation for



**Figure 11: Page from Alphabet book (age 5)**  
“A is for apple”



something else, school curricula and what we perceived as the social norms expected by a child of Emily's age; we worked towards making sure that she met those standards.

### Emily's School Writing

Before Emily started kindergarten we moved to Indiana as a family so that I could pursue my Ph.D. She and I started school less than a month after we arrived. I was very focused, starting my course work, teaching at Indiana University, and finishing my Master's thesis. We were all adjusting to a new home and Christine was pregnant with Simon. So between finishing school, starting school and taking care of everyone I was consciously not collecting data from Emily. But she quickly got my attention. When Emily started kindergarten, her writing stopped. Christine and I thought Emily might have stopped writing because of the move and that she was just adjusting to her new surroundings and focusing her energy and attention on other things. We were wrong. At Christmas I had successfully completed my thesis and our family was getting established. Christine had given birth to Simon and our home was settling down and entering a happy rhythm. And I turned my attention to why my daughter, who had been a prolific writer since she was 2 ½ years old, had now stopped writing for the past five months. My first discovery was horrifying; Emily had lost all confidence in her own ability to write. She believed that she couldn't write and didn't know how to write.

### Writing in Kindergarten

I had started to volunteer in Emily's class once a week at the beginning of the school year, so I knew it was not the type of play-based kindergarten program I used in my classroom, but assumed that because it was a loving environment no harm was being done. Upon analysis of the data collected from Ms. K's class, it was not what Ms. K explicitly did or said in her classroom that stopped Emily from writing but the tacit underlying messages and the values which were embedded in the curricular and pedagogical choices mandated by the School District and made by Ms. K for her classroom.

Ms. K ran a half day kindergarten with Emily attending in the afternoon. This classroom was set up with the focus on the teacher. The children sat at desks that were set up in a U-shape facing the front blackboard and the teacher. The day was divided up into short blocks of time, with each chunk of time addressing a specific subject area. Mrs. K used the state recommended curriculum and interjected her own interpretations and examples to enhance student learning. She regularly used worksheets (see figure 13) to give the students practice with the topic being discussed and to assess their learning. The classroom was well organized and the students were well behaved, with the obligatory few 'trouble students'. Mrs. K worked hard to create a safe and loving environment for the students. On the surface it looked as if Ms. K was an excellent teacher and, in all honesty according to state guidelines, she would probably be deemed exemplary. In fact Emily performed quite well in this environment, according to state and federal guidelines for kindergarten, meeting

**K Kindergarten Report Card**  
School Corporation

Student: Emily Wood  
School: A school Year: 1997-98  
Date Entered: April 1998 Date Left: \_\_\_\_\_  
Teacher: Ms. K

**Explanation of Marks**  
+ All of the items completed  
✓ Most of the items completed  
✓ Some of the items completed  
- None of the items completed  
\* Not marked by teacher (did not write or write at all)

Social, Emotional Development	1	2	3	4
I observe school rules	+	+		
I play well with others	+	+		
I am developing self-confidence	+	+		
I am polite and courteous	+	+		
I keep my hands and feet to myself	+	+		
I follow directions	+	+		
I do my work carefully and neatly	+	+		
I work without disturbing others	+	+		
I work independently	+	+		
I am not easily distracted	+	+		
I make good use of my time	+	+		
I listen attentively	+	+		
I express myself well in group discussions	+	+		
I am responsible for my belongings	+	+		

Physical Development	1	2	3	4
I use my small muscles (scissors, crayons, glue, etc.)	+	+		
I can print my name	+	+		
I can write upper case letters	+	+		
I can print lower case letters	+	+		

Special Areas (These marks reflect participation & effort in these classes)

Music/Teacher	1	2	3	4
Music/Teacher	+	+		
Phys. Ed./Teacher	+	+		

**Academic Development**

I recognize the following colors:  
Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown, black, white

I recognize these letters:  
Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii  
Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr  
Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

I recognize these beginning sounds:  
Ba Ca Da Fa Ga Ha Ia Ja Ka La Ma Na Pa Qa Ra Sa Ta Va Wa Xa Ya Za

I can say the ABC's  
Oct Jan March May

I can count to 39 37  
Oct Jan March May

I can identify three solid geometric shapes:  
○ □ ▲ ▭

I can recognize these numbers:  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21

I can print these numbers:  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21

I understand the following:

associating numbers with their sets	1	2	3	4
associating numbers with their sets	+	+		
classifying	+	+		
counting	+	+		
sequencing	+	+		
light/dark	+	+		
rhyming	+	+		

Comments:  
John - child 5m/5

**Figure 12: Emily's January kindergarten report card (age 5)** or exceeding all expectations (see figure 12). My concern is not that Emily did not meet State expectations in this class; my concern is that in this class her self confidence was destroyed and she no longer saw herself as a capable writer.

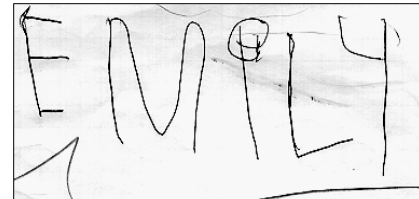
The data samples I collected from the work that Emily brought home are about control, accuracy, form, and convention. There is no creative spirit or attempt to build on



**Figure 13: Phonics Worksheet – The letter <E> (age 5)**

Emily's prior knowledge. There is not the message of capability that we wanted

Emily to learn and feel. The worksheet sample above (see figure 13) is indicative of the work that Emily did in Ms. K's class. Going beyond the fact that this is a phonics worksheet, notice that Emily has misspelled her name and reversed all of the <E>s in the boxes; these are two things Emily had mastered by the time she was three years old (see figure 14). The message from home was directly in conflict with the message at school and the message from school was that what she had learned at home was wrong and to succeed at school she needed to forget what she had learned.



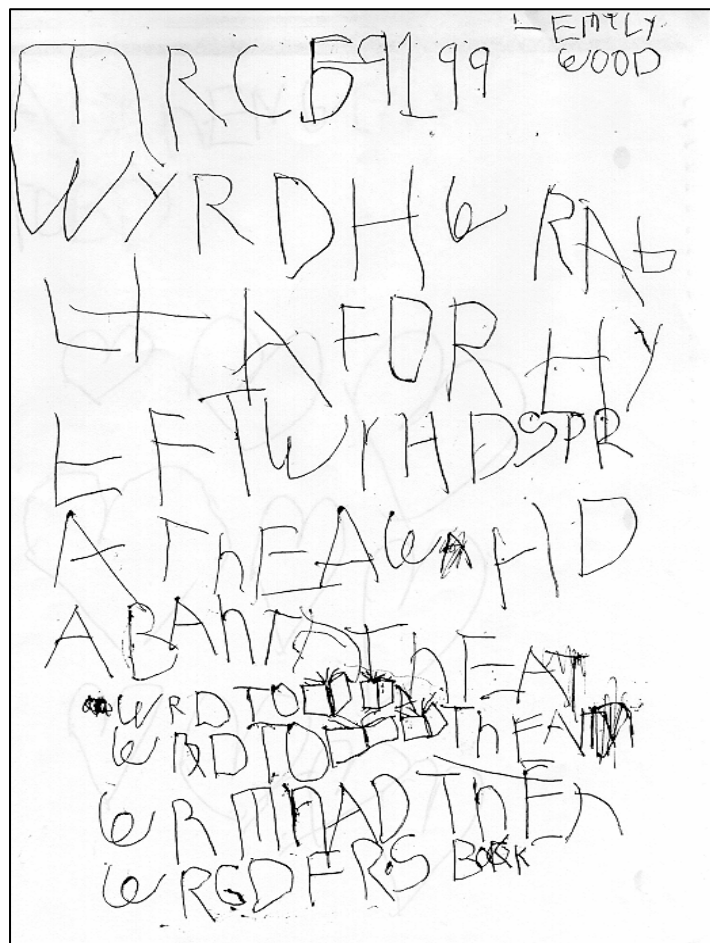
**Figure 14: Emily name writing (age 3)**

So why did Emily no longer see herself as a competent writer? I think it comes down to the underlying theme of Ms. K's teaching which is best described as pedagogy of control (Lesley, 2003). Emily quickly understood that it was her job to listen, follow instructions and routines, do her work, and above all else **not** to think for herself. The literacies instruction carried the message that there is only one interpretation of literacy which is valid, and that her inventions and constructions of literacies were wrong and not valid. Emily accepted that conventional literacy was the only acceptable literacy, so she stopped using her inventions and waited to learn the 'proper' way. It is important to add that this was not what Ms. K was trying to accomplish, but it was the tacit message she sent through her teaching practice of the letter of the week, phonics and writing worksheets, and the way she read aloud to the class. The message was "There is only one correct literacy and you must learn it at school."

Emily starts to write again.

After much encouragement from Christine and me Emily slowly started to write for herself. I took out my Master's thesis on her writing and showed her the value I placed on her work and showed the praise her writing had received from friends and colleagues. After several long talks Emily slowly began to see herself as a writer and to write close to the volume she used to write before starting kindergarten. However, it wasn't until March that she felt confident enough in herself as a writer to share her writing with her class.

Ms. K had a reading program, which she started in the New Year, where she sent a teddy bear, Godfrey the Bear, home to a different family every evening with a couple of books; the family was supposed to read the books with Godfrey and write in his journal about what he did while with the family. Most of the entries were written by adults. Emily chose to write



**Figure 15: Godfrey's Journal entry (age 6)**

We rode home with rob/ert after he / left we had supper / and then we had / a bath and then / we read two books / we read two books that / were mine and then / we read Godfrey's book

her own entry (see Figure15). When Emily return the log to the class Ms. K praised Emily's writing and asked her to read her writing to the class. Ms. K's reaction to Emily's writing demonstrates to me that she was not conscious of the tacit message Emily understood from the state inspired pedagogy used in the class. After this Emily occasionally chose to do writing at school during "free-time" but she still continued to passively look to Ms. K for direction and her learning at school.

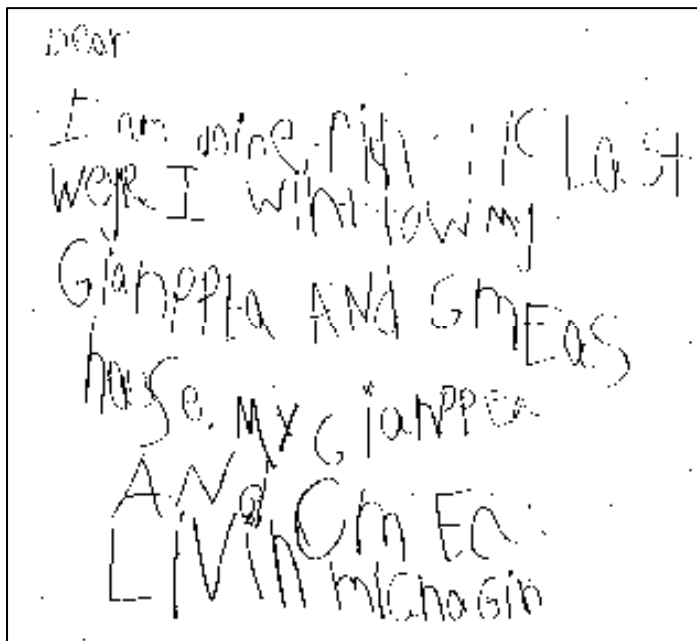
This is not to say all of Emily's experiences in Ms. K's classroom were negative; she has fond memories of her time in Ms. K's class, and it is possible that this experience is what helped Emily move from experimental to more conventional writing. She certainly learned how to do what was required of her in a school setting. Her writing increased as her confidence increased and she was prepared for the new experience that greeted her in the first grade.

### First Grade Writing

Emily's first grade classroom was very different pedagogically from her kindergarten class. This classroom was a multi-age class of first and second grade students and two teachers. The structure was very free and student focused. Mr. V and Ms. E divided their roles along lines of their personal curricular interests and not by grade level. Their pedagogical approach was about sharing power with students, and the students taking ownership of their own learning. The class was very active and hands on; Emily's fondest memories are of the experiments they did and the many class pets and plants the students



cared for. The students regularly left the classroom for investigations, reading buddies, to do research in the library, to do drama, or just to change venue. The year was loosely focused around a year-long inquiry into Lewis and Clark but was focused on, and was flexible to, the needs, interests, and



**Figure 16: One of Emily pen pal letter (age 6)**

Dear XXXX / I am doing fine. Last / week I went to my / grandpa and grandma's / house. My grandpa and grandma live in Michigan.

questions of the students. Writing was seen as a vital part of all of these activities. Emily also regularly wrote for authentic purposes in this class; she had pen pals at the nearby university (see figure 16) and at a school in a different country, she wrote book reports and plays, and she and her classmates wrote letters to members of government to affect changes in her community. Writing was used and viewed by her teachers as a form of communication and a tool for social change. This tacit message of literacies, and specifically writing, as a source of personal and societal change is something that began to permeate Emily's writing and is a perspective she maintains today. The tacit messages being conveyed in this classroom worked in concert with Emily's own beliefs about literacies, extending and expanding them. The change was not only theoretical in nature but also in a measurable and conventional sense as well;

her writing continued to expand in volume and quality. Emily took this experience and used writing as a tool to try to influence

First of all I want a Rate  
 be kose they are  
 Route + Soft. Sakind of all  
 I want a Rate be kose  
 I have had I sperce with  
 them I am willing  
 to take care of it, and I  
 will make sure that  
 the rat unless somebody  
 is holding it, I will feed  
 the rate when it needs  
 to be ~~fed~~ fed

**Figure 17: Emily's letter for a pet rat (age 7)**

First of all I want a rat / because they are / cute and soft. Second of all / I want a rat because / I have had experience with / them. I am willing / to take care of it. And I / will make sure that / the rat [is in its cage] unless somebody / is holding it. I will feed / the rat when it needs / to be fed.

decisions made at home as well (see figure 17); this letter was written at the end of the year to successfully convince Christine and me to allow Emily to have a pet rat, after her class's pet rats had babies.

In many ways this pedagogy in Emily's class was very consistent with what I believe in as an educator: student directed learning,

**INDIAN PROJECT EVALUATION**

Name Emily

Type of dwelling Prance / tipi

Brought project in on time	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Brought in completed rubric	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Presented to the class	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Answered questions about the project	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No

What we really love about the project We can tell you put a lot of work into this project. The background really adds a lot!

Areas for improvement Be sure you know what is written on your rubric sheet.

**Figure 18: Sample of a first grade rubric. (age 7)**

centres, and an inquiry approach. But there were also things I had a difficult time understanding as an educator: the obsession with grading was overwhelming; every piece of data Emily brought home from this class has a grade or comment on it (see figure 18), there was also a rigidity in the way things were evaluated and graded; for example when we decided Emily would be better off without spelling tests her teachers refused to give her a grade on spelling instead of evaluating the spelling she used in her writing.<sup>3</sup> Both of these pedagogical features seem to be strongly influenced by the larger 'American educational discourse' and were strongly encouraged by the school administration and other parents. Much like the emphasis on testing, this is a discourse, as a Canadian educator, that I was unfamiliar with. These pedagogical characteristics would seem to be in conflict with the overall pedagogy of the class but were essentially transparent to Emily and did not conflict with the tacit pedagogy of student ownership in the class.

In the same way that Emily's kindergarten class set up a conflict between what Emily understood about writing and what was valued as writing, her first grade class confirmed and reinforced these beliefs and practices. These two classrooms reflect the value laden nature of curriculum and literacies instruction. The tacit and expressed beliefs of our pedagogy have the ability to support or undermine the literacies beliefs of our students.

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<sup>3</sup> Her teachers need to be commended for honoring our desires to have Emily stop her spelling tests without question or challenge.

## Grade Two Writing

Emily's grade two experience was interesting. We had moved back to Ontario, Canada to a city just outside of Toronto. Emily loved being close to family again but missed her friends in Bloomington. And we as a family suffered from the culture shock of returning to place we thought we knew but saw through new eyes. Emily attended the neighbourhood school.

This year was very conflicted pedagogically. Emily's teacher was a new teacher in her first year. Ms. U was progressive in her approach to teaching but the school was very traditional pedagogically and Ms. U was under constant pressure to follow the practice of the much older, and experienced, staff

members. This was further conflicted because this was a split grade one/two class; the new Ontario Curriculum had very specific expectations for each grade but no supporting materials for how to address these within a split grade.

This resulted in what could only be called an eclectic pedagogy. Reading and writing were valued in this class, but they were tightly

WRITING A MATHEMATICAL STORYBOOK  
PLANNING PAGE

TITLE: Nancy two-three  
(A MATHEMATICAL STORYBOOK)

WRITTEN BY - Emily Wood

GRADE 2 © 2001

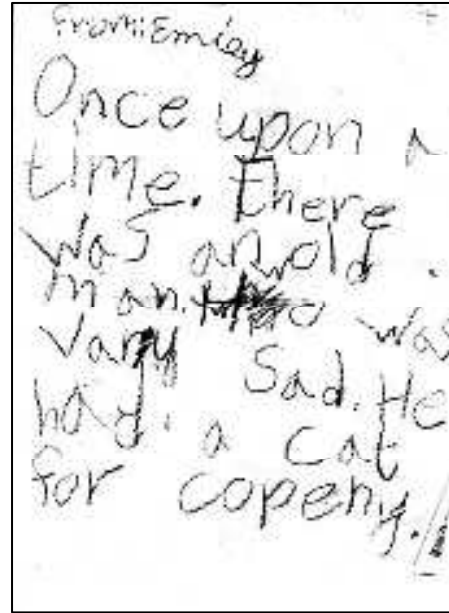
PAGE 1 - Introduction (Who? Where? What?)  
Hi Tim Nancy I  
live in a mansion with  
my family

PAGE 2 - Event  
our family last day  
found but guess what?  
I found five cents in a

PAGE 3 - Event  
I have good news! I found  
ten dollars in animal

**Figure 19: Typical planning worksheet (age 8)**

controlled by the teacher; literacies were treated as multiple with the integration of many subject areas and literacies but the vast majority of the work done in the class related to a worksheet in one form or another (see figure 19). The class had regular spelling tests but Emily was allowed to be exempt when we requested that she not be given them. I started the year volunteering in Emily's class one afternoon a week, but in the spring I was told my help was no longer needed in the class.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 20: Page from a story written at home. (age 7)**

From: Emily / Once upon a / time, there / was an old / man who was / very sad. He had a cat / for company.

Emily was given spelling tests with the rest of the class immediately after this occurred; Christine and I were not consulted. Emily responded by totally acquiescing to the teacher's instructions but unlike kindergarten she continued to write while at home (see figure 20).

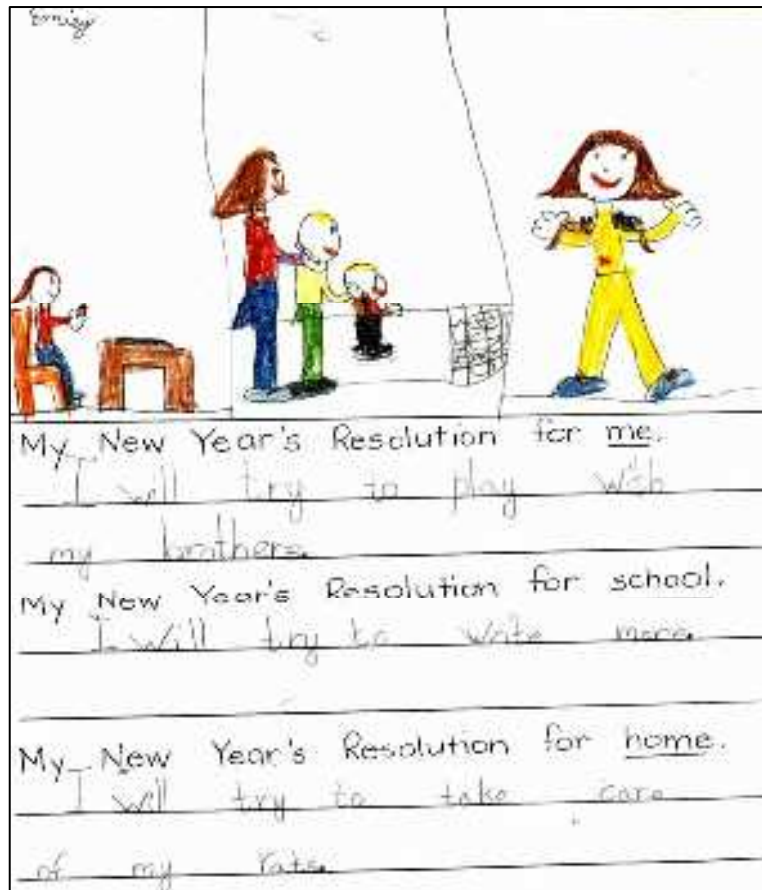
I found this year very fascinating as an educational researcher. Ms. U did so many things that were consistent with what I did in my class and what I wanted to see Emily doing. Assessment in the class was done through using portfolios, literacies and subjects were integrated, there wasn't a compulsive need to assign a grade to everything, reading was valued and personal choice of books was encouraged.<sup>5</sup> But, there were still the worksheets that seemed ubiquitous throughout Emily's time in school, there were tests, and there was a

<sup>4</sup> I have suspicions as to why this was, but was not given a reason.

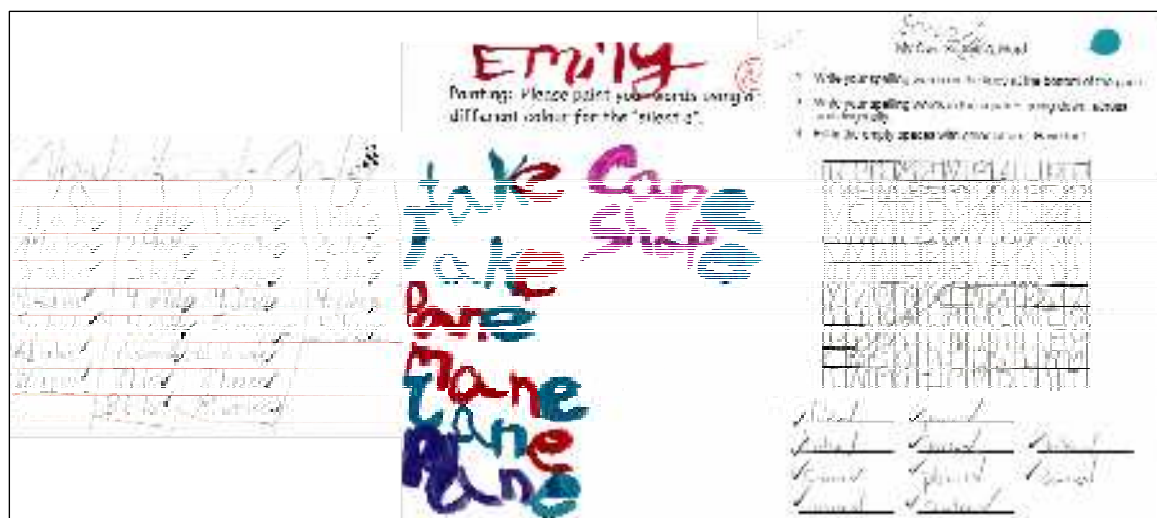
<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the class was located adjacent to the library, with an adjoining door.

return to the sense of teacher-control that was prevalent in Emily's kindergarten class. I find it remarkable that Emily remembers little from this class, it being her last year to attend school, and that some of the memories she ascribes to this class were actually from her first grade class.

Many of the assignments in this class integrated reading, writing, math, science, and/or art. Writing was constantly encouraged and



**Figure 21** A New Year resolution worksheet. (age 7)



**Figure 22:** A series of spelling activities (age 8)



expected. It was the main mode of communication about learning (see figures 19 & 21). There were many times when Emily was to write for the sake of writing but the content was tightly controlled (see figure 21) or included one of a whole series of spelling activities (figure 22). This series was typical, though there are some samples that include an even more expanded practice of spelling words. Before Emily was required to do the spelling activities and tests she would typically read or finish other work at these times. Though Emily remembers little from this year of schooling she still excelled at the game of school, continuing to meet or exceed the provincial expectations for her grade. It is interesting that during each year Emily was in school she performed well against the standards imposed by the state, yet it is only her time in first grade that she remembers positively and it was during this year that she experienced explosive growth in her literacies use and understanding.

#### Emily's Writing at Home While She Attended School

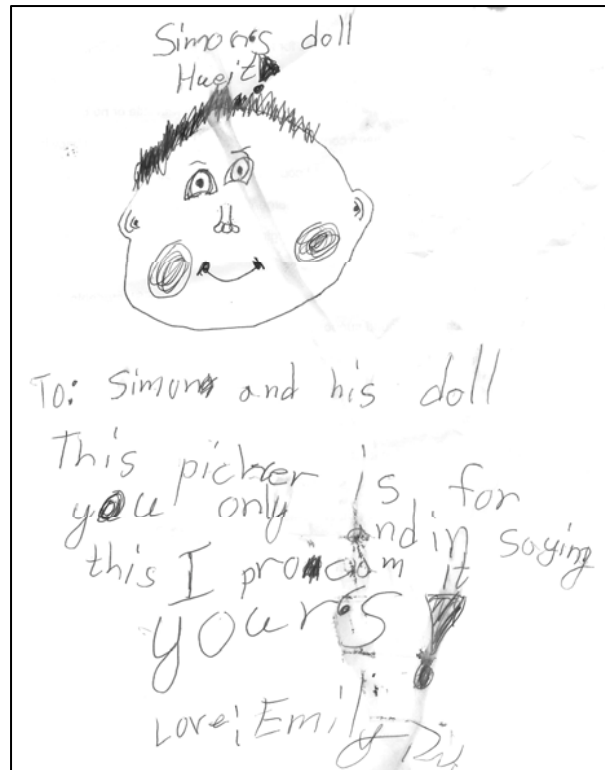
During the time Emily attended school we supported her as a capable and successful literacies user at home. We gave Emily supplies, praise and an environment that respected and valued the work she was doing as a writer. While she was in first grade this was a message that reinforced what she understood from school, but the rest of time she spent in school this acted as a counter-narrative.

With the exception of the brief, six month, time during which she stopped writing, she wrote on an almost daily basis while at home, for her own pleasure

and to share with others. Emily is a writer and the literacies she preferred to use during this time period were reading and writing. Christine and I did our best to support this with continued trips to the library and other activities and community programs in a similar manner to what we did before she started school. The significant difference being that, after Simon had been born and Emily had stopped writing, we were much more conscious of doing things with Emily to support her current interests and needs, not for some future goal or intention. When Emily stopped writing Christine and I took serious stock of what we were doing with Emily at home and examined our practices and rationales for them, looking for inconsistencies and eradicating them when discovered. We focused on who Emily, and the boys, were and did our best to live and support them in the moment and helping them where they were at and not necessarily where we thought they should be going. This doesn't mean that our home life was suddenly transformed in to a pedagogically consistent paradise; it was not, but we changed our focus from encouraging the children in their learning that was expected by societal norms and to simply enjoying who they were as people.

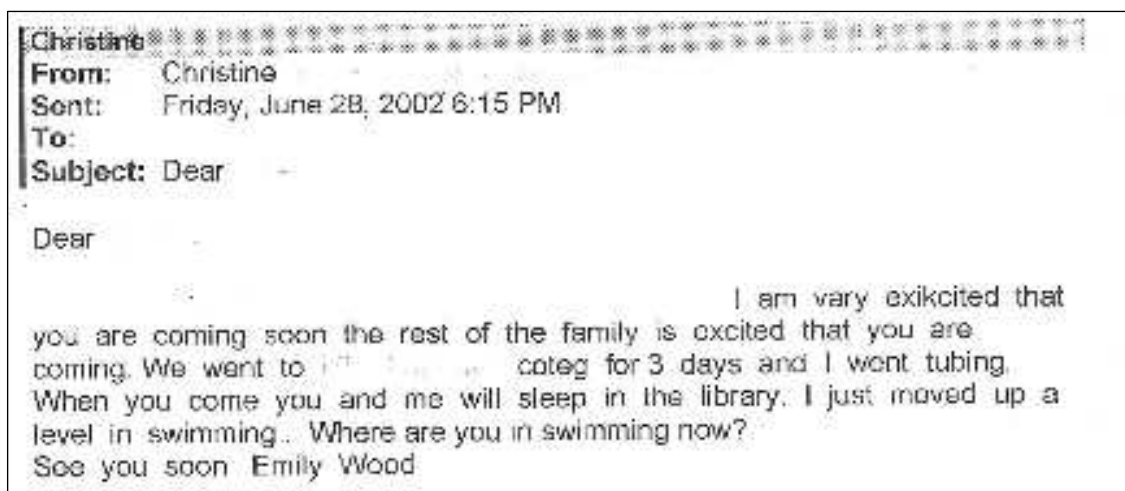
Emily has always loved to write. She has never been hung up on spelling and has always placed a great emphasis on meaning in her work. During Emily's time in first grade she continued to blossom as a writer. She continued to use scribble writing in her journal and for notes she wrote for herself, though this type of writing started to wane from regular use. Emily started to emphasize printing and personal writing in the messages she posted and gave out to friends and family (see figure 23). She started to experiment with her writing, adding

punctuation and experimenting with different font types and genres. Her confidence had returned fully. Emily saw herself as a writer and as capable. She started to help Christine with different writing tasks around the house, often writing out the shopping list for Christine and making signs for the dramas she and Tristan were playing. She started to see literacies not only as something she was doing for herself but as capable of influencing her life, and she started to try to influence family members through writing (see figure 17).



**Figure 23: Picture for Simon and Hoyt (age 7)**  
 Simon's doll / Hoyt!  
 To: Simon and his doll / This picture is for / you only and saying / this I proclaim it / yours! / Love: Emily W.

Emily continued to write and develop her understanding of writing while at home during grade two. She regularly wrote to her friends in Indiana, specifically



**Figure 24: Emily's email to a friend in Indiana (age 9)**

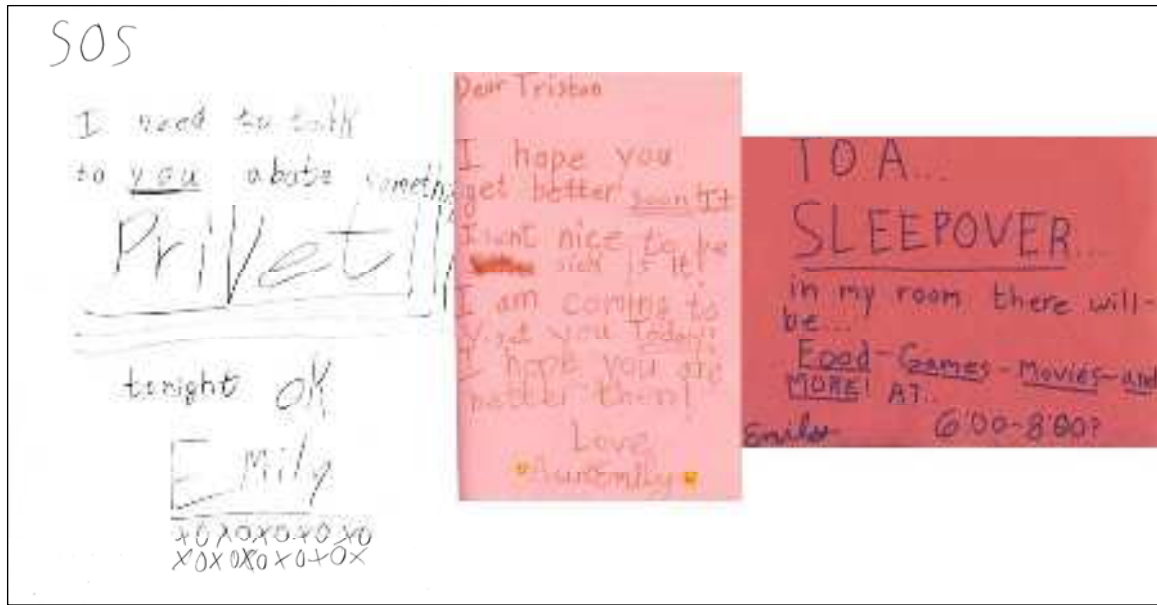
one girl she developed a strong friendship with in kindergarten. They regularly wrote to each other, either in letters or by email (see figure 24) and through the experience of this correspondence Emily started to write letters to other friends and family. It is also interesting that as Emily started to explore this new genre, other forms of writing that she was beginning to master in her letter writing, such as spelling, grammar and other conventions, seemed to be forgotten while she focused on the form of writing. I suspect that this was further complicated by her learning how to use the keyboard in addition to the nuances of email as a form/genre of writing. It appears that she chose to focus on the orthographic features of email writing and in so doing needed to ignore other aspects of writing. Because these were public texts Emily took advantage of our drafting process and all that remains are my research notes and the final copies, as Emily did not save drafts.

Emily continued to explore writing outside of school, sometimes incorporating what was expected of her at school while at other times developing as a writer in spite of what she was being taught in school. Writing was a way that Emily constructed meaning and explored her understanding of the world. With her discovery of the internet and email her ability to communicate with friends and learn about the world beyond our immediate family and friends expanded. Home was a place where Emily could safely explore writing and her role as a writer.

### Emily and Unschooling

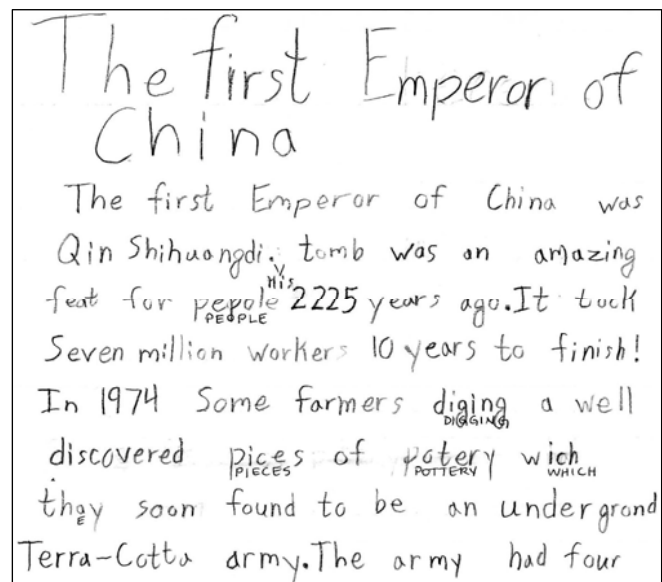
After grade two Christine and I decided to try unschooling (Holt, 1989) with the children. This is a pedagogy that enacts a pure form of constructivist pedagogy; the children have a choice in what, when and where they want to learn. Christine and I act as facilitators of this learning, occasionally imposing limits (e.g. encouraging Emily to stop reading and play with her brothers and choose other activities, or limiting the children's videogame play to one hour each a day). This choice was not one that we made against the school system, but because we felt we could offer a better education for our children; one that is specifically designed to meet their needs, interests, and learning styles, and pace. This type of child-focused constructivist pedagogy is something that was extremely difficult to enact within the Ontario Curriculum that existed in schools in Ontario at the time. This is also not saying that there were not excellent teachers who were trying to enact innovative pedagogy within this curriculum; we just felt that the needs of our children could be best met through unschooling. This decision to unschool the children was one that was made in concert with the children and is one that we revisit each summer.

Emily continued to explore writing regularly during this time. Her use of varied genres continued to increase, the lessons she learned in her first grade class were consolidated and she regularly used writing to change, affect and communicate with the world around her. Emily regularly wrote notes, cards, invitations (see figure 25), and poetry (see poem on page 69). The house became filled with signs that she made for herself and for the boys. She made



**Figure 25: Emily's writing to family members, in dramatic role and out. (age 9)** signs to control access to different locations of the house, like her room or the playroom, to advertise for events she was planning, or as a part of elaborate dramatic plays she created with Tristan and Simon. Emily started to use writing as a way of expressing herself and sharing what she knows with others. She started to write book reports, and project reports for home schooling group get

together (see figure 26). On this project report you will notice Christine's spelling suggestions; conventional spelling was never emphasized in our home and anytime the children wanted to write conventionally we first required at least one draft (not necessarily the whole

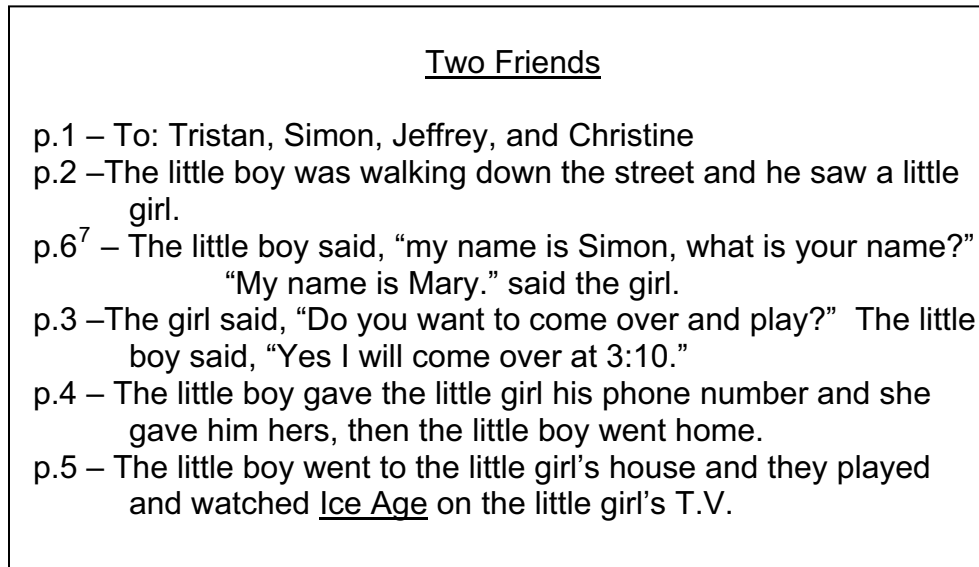


**Figure 26: Final Draft of the Emperor China project (top 1/2) (age 10)**



composition but the words they wanted checked)<sup>6</sup>.

Emily started to keep a journal and started to write stories that went beyond those she had always written for herself but were written for specific audiences (see Figure 27). She also started to create her own lists for when we



**Figure 27: Transcript from Emily’s story. (age 10)**

went on trips or did anything special. These are all things she chose to do on her own; Emily’s was not a choice of a certain number of things that she could do throughout the day, she had choice to do whatever she wanted to do. If she wanted to read all day she could (later we sometimes imposed the aforementioned limits on all activities to specifically encourage interaction between the children) and she chose to write in some form or another almost every day. The thing that has amazed me about Emily’s writing is that her spelling and use of grammar steadily became more conventional over time, even though she has received very little direct spelling instruction (all of the samples

<sup>6</sup> Emily only took advantage of this process when she wanted to publish something beyond family and close friends. Tristan regularly asked for this editing process regardless of what he wrote.

<sup>7</sup> This page was added at the end as an editorial addition and was intended to be in this order.

used in this chapter are, with the exception of the email, drafts). It seems as she developed greater experience with a literacy she was able to pay more and more attention to conventional understanding without limiting her use of that literacy.

Throughout this time Christine and I made a more conscious effort to support the children in learning what they want to learn, instead of teaching them what we thought they need to learn. At times this was difficult, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5, but we have enormous faith in our children and that they, as human beings, are capable and able to learn all they need and want to learn. We believed, and still believe, that given the right environment and setting they would constantly want to learn, and they have. This was furthered by our practice of not directly answering the children's questions but answering with a question, or more commonly, "what do you think?" or "why don't we try to find out?" We always supported the children in these investigations but did our best not to assume that what we knew was the best answer. We also believed that the process of finding the answers to their questions was more valuable than the answers to those questions.

Christine and the children started the process of writing a bi-monthly newsletter, the Jubilee Journal, which grew out of the yearly update we send to friends and family at New Years and the newspapers we received at home. Christine and the children had the idea that they wanted to start their own newspaper. The children contributed article on topics they were researching, things they were doing, stories they had written, or an interview they conducted, and Christine would do the editing and layout. This gave the children a specific

audience for their writing and meant that at least once every two months they took a piece of writing through the authoring cycle (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). Emily was a regular contributor to this journal and very excited about sharing her work. An important thing to add is that this journal and its content are decided by the children and is derived from work they are currently investigating; all that the journal did was provide an audience for this work<sup>8</sup>.

As an example of how this works; the children were very interested in geography and specifically different countries since we started unschooling. In our dining room there is a large map for the children to reference anytime and it was something often discussed during meals. The children and Christine labelled the map with names of friends and family and the places they lived. As the children asked questions about different places we encourage them to contact the people we might have known that lived there, we borrowed books, movies and audio material from the library, investigated through the internet and on several occasions visited the location, when it was relatively local. The children would then write about the chosen location as an article in the Jubilee Journal, taking the article through the authoring cycle.

### Overview of Emily's Literacies Uses and Understandings

Emily used writing as an extension of who she is as a person, and in powerful life changing ways. Though, for simplicity's sake, I teased Emily's

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<sup>8</sup> The Jubilee Journal was not actually published until after the data collection for this project stopped. But for over two years the children made contributions and were very interested in publishing it; it just took Christine and me a while to figure out the logistics. The journal has been published regularly for the past two years

writing out of her literacies use, she was always using literacies as multiple. For her, literacies were social and used for communication and to influence the world around her. Literacies were not only transformative, they defined who she saw herself as; they define and are defining. Emily is and has always been a capable literacies user, though I have not always recognized this in her.

Written text is all around us in our society and it was the primary way in which Emily communicated with the world. She was constantly writing. The more she wrote the better a writer she became, in terms of content of her ideas and in her use of convention. Spelling was not something we focused on as being important in our family and yet as Emily wrote her spelling consistently improved. As Emily used writing to communicate with others and as she took her writing through the editing process her understanding of convention and genre were expanded. It seems as though as Emily increased her experience with writing through writing (and reading) she improved as a writer.

As I saw this steady improvement in Emily's understanding of writing, and other literacies, I began to trust in Emily as a literacies learner. Through Emily my understanding of literacies was transformed; preparing me to better understand and see Tristan's and Simon's literacies uses and understandings.