



## Dear Mrs L – Letter writing between teacher and student

### What Happened?

In the days preceding Term 2, our school had a two day conference led by Beth Woods during which she discussed different teaching and learning styles, and strategies. She spoke of several strategies that she had used in different classes and briefly spoke of weekly letters she had written with a class.

At many teaching development days I've attended, people spoke of using your story and tapping into children's stories. I've done this orally for many years to great advantage – students love to talk and tell. Weekly letters would let me tap further into student's stories but I had no idea how effectively. Beth stressed that the letters not be marked as such – they are a means of communication not assessment.

I have a year 3/4 class who have struggled with reading and writing. I don't know what it is about year 3 boys but at that age I have found that they disengage with the pen and 'story writing' as such dries up. This was a way to get some writing out of them. So it was that at the beginning of Term 2 that I decided to do letter writing for Journal. We did it everyday for the first 2 weeks so that it became an entrenched routine. They had to write 10 lines and they had to do it to get out to recess. It also meant that I had to read and reply to each letter every night. It wasn't a chore though (for me anyway). I find reading the letters fun and so enlightening. They told me things they could not say out loud, they made suggestions, they complained about where they were at and they gave me compliments sometimes. They started writing. Many whinged about it and fought the ten line limit.

We started with a topic about the class each day to give them some starting point and structure eg PE or art or our morning talk. We wrote about what was working and more importantly what wasn't working. Gradually I taught other writing by suggesting presentation ideas to each one. I used a big book *Dear Ben Dear Sam* to model letter writing and talked about paragraphs. We now timetable Mrs L letters on Monday and Friday and at the end of Term 3 we are still writing. We now do at least 12 lines a letter.

Along the way we have had some intriguing teaching points that have helped the whole class. If you have to write ten lines without a margin, you write more than if you use a margin. Margins have become acceptable – for me it is for presentation's sake and for them it is for less writing's sake. One lad realised that if he repeated requests with lots of pleases listed one after another he could fill in his ten lines. This was acceptable to both of us provided he learnt about the rule to use a comma in lists. He soon did. He also soon got sick of writing like this but has internalised the comma rule and so have the class.

Their writing still has a long way to go but it is improving. I have proof of where they are up to, I have a line into each child on a personal basis and I hear some great ideas which we incorporate into special days and photos. They have already written a special letter to their parents last term and shared a term's work of letters at home. Some parents even wrote back.