

An Early Experience with Writing
By Suzanne Valenza

It was February in my second grade classroom. My teacher had us making Valentine's Day cards for our parents. I had lovingly decorated my pink construction paper with red hearts, and I distinctly recall doilies glued with the precision of my eight-year-old fingers. I was into it. This was going to be my best card yet. When I began composing my message for the inside of the card, I hit a snag. I wanted to express my love for both of my parents. But I didn't know how to spell the word that came to mind. I had heard the word often, but had never seen it in print. So the little Queens Italian girl who I was approached the teacher's desk and asked her, "How do you spell youse?" since I wanted to write "I love youse guys."

Now, I also loved my second grade teacher. I adored her in fact. She is the reason I am a teacher today. She tried to, but could not suppress a giggle. "Oh, Suzanne," she said smiling, "*youse* is not a word. Just use you--it works for one or more than one person."

I was slightly embarrassed, but not too much, and that is why this experience remains with me. I remember smiling too. She made her correction light-heartedly, and was endearing about it. She didn't try to shame me in any way. She simply made a matter-of-fact correction with kindness that she then turned into a mini grammar lesson for all the other working class kids in the room. We all said youse. Our parents all said youse. So many of the kids in that room nodded their heads with the understanding of this newfound knowledge, and erased and corrected their "I love youse guys" greetings.

No, I was not ashamed; a tribute to my teacher for how instead, she helped make me feel special. I had been given access that morning. I came to understand something crucial about being literate, correct, and educated--perhaps even a bit more than my parents. I had gained some footing, some small sense of empowerment. And I liked it.