
Connecting Literacy Learners: A Pen Pal Project

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Connecting literacy learners: A pen pal project

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Being literate relates to one's ability to read, write, listen, and speak. However, literacy is not an all-or-none phenomenon. Our ability to transmit and understand both private and public knowledge through oral and written forms increases when we have opportunities to use these behaviors in real communication activities and to receive feedback on their effectiveness. The pen pal project described in this article was developed to provide these opportunities for using language to two distinct groups of learners—elementary special education students who were not conventional readers and writers, sometimes even referred to as “nonreaders and nonwriters” (Englert & Palincsar, 1991), and university education majors learning to serve this population of students. A primary aim of this project was to create opportunities for personal growth for the participants. For elementary students, it was ex-

pected that the growth would be primarily in literacy skills—reading, writing, and oral communication. For the university students, growth was expected in developing skills related to observing, reflecting, analyzing, and decision making. In this article I will discuss the implementation of the pen pal project, describe how it was incorporated into a resource classroom, and examine the benefits of participating in the project for the special education and university students.

Basic to the concept of holistic teaching are the tenets that literacy instruction needs to be relevant, serve a real function or purpose, and be meaningful to the language learner (Goodman, 1986). One activity that meets these requirements for literacy growth is writing and receiving personal letters from a pen pal. The traditional description of pen pals as peers who exchange letters is not new. However, recent projects involving pen pals of targeted partners have demonstrated added benefits. For example, projects involving school children and senior citizens (Ashe, 1987; Bryant, 1989) and peers of other races (Foster, 1989) have resulted in positive relationships and increased understanding and respect between partners and groups as a whole. Pen pal projects with students in different countries have been suggested as a way to increase awareness of global issues, ethnic diversity, cultural pluralism, and interdependence (Peters, 1985). Electronic mail, another vehicle for written exchange between individuals, has provided students moti-

vation for written communication as well as practice in emerging technological skills (Foster, 1989; Levin, Rogers, Waugh, & Smith, 1989). In addition, pen pals have been used within teacher training programs to encourage preservice teachers to observe writing growth in students (Burk, 1989), provide opportunities to model and encourage writing development (Yellin, 1987), and help foster an understanding of the appropriate balance between formal matters of writing, content, and intent (Crowhurst, 1990). Similarly, it is believed that written interaction in the form of dialogue journals results in comparable benefits for a variety of students (Shuy, 1987), including students with learning disabilities (McGettigan, 1987) and English as a Second Language students (Young, 1990). Both activities potentially provide an atmosphere for learning that incorporates a safe social context, an attentive audience, a meaningful exchange of ideas, and individual and personal response—all of which are situations likely to increase motivation to write better and to write more.

This project was designed to match special education elementary students and university preservice teachers in an attempt to create authentic texts for literacy learning. Traditional special education and remedial instruction has emphasized the components and subskills of language without significant attention to maintaining the sense of the “whole” language event (Allington, 1983; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989). In addition, services for special learners have focused on individualized instruction, often to the exclusion of attention to community and the social interactive aspects of learning. This project grew out of a desire to move away from the more traditional experiences offered in special education by providing elementary students with an opportunity for interactive literacy experiences that were holistic and socially satisfying. While this project is situated in the context of special education, the basic principles of learning underlying the project, the reading and writing issues addressed, and the overall project design are applicable to other contexts for promoting literacy growth.

Project participants

The elementary school and students. The elementary school that the pen pals attended

served approximately 480 students and was selected for a number of reasons, including the relatively high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity represented for this midwestern U.S. region (28% African American, 9% Native American, Mexican American/Latino, Southeast Asian, and other), the number of students qualifying for special services (26% special education, 17% Chapter 1), and the number of lower socioeconomic status students (68% qualified for free or reduced lunch).

The 30 to 35 elementary students involved as pen pals each semester were second through sixth graders with reading levels ranging from preprimer to fourth grade on standardized reading measures. All pen pals received special services through programs targeted for children with learning disabilities (55%), mild mental handicaps (20%), behavior disorders (15%), and Chapter 1 reading students (10%). Special education or Chapter 1 teachers identified these students as individuals who would likely benefit both academically and socially from participation in the writing project.

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The university class and students. This project was a requirement for a class, Diagnosis and Correction of Reading Disabilities, offered through the Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. The course is intended to familiarize students with various types of reading and writing problems, possible causes, assessment procedures, and appropriate materials, methods, and intervention strategies for nonconventional readers and writers. It is offered to senior level under-

graduate students and to graduate students who are special education majors and is a required course for undergraduate students working toward a Grade 7-12 reading endorsement. Typically, students have taken at least one reading methods class prior to enrolling in this course.

An emphasis of the recent call for reform in teacher education programs has been to provide experiences that develop preservice teachers' abilities to thoughtfully analyze and make strategic educational decisions. Edmundson (1990) pointed out that "...the whole curriculum in teacher education...must focus deliberate and sustained attention on the development of the skills and attitudes needed for decision making and reflection" (p. 720). As the instructor of a group of preservice teachers learning about literacy, I wanted to provide my students with more than knowledge about learning, curriculum, and instructional methods by encouraging them to integrate that knowledge and apply the information in classroom situations. However, the class involved in this project was a night class, and therefore not related to a field placement in the schools. Consequently, connecting my students with children in other ways became a priority. This pen pal project served that purpose while also providing my students the opportunity to "think like teachers." As my students corresponded with their pen pals they were expected to observe, reflect, analyze, hypothesize, make decisions, and respond—in other words, to practice the behaviors that embody good teaching.

Project description

Resource teacher responsibilities. I began the pen pal project, currently in the sixth semester of implementation, each semester by contacting Shelley Clayburn, the resource teacher who spearheaded the project within the school. She arranged the initial meetings with the teachers who agreed to involve their students and served as my contact person throughout the project. During our initial meeting, arrangements were made regarding the logistics of "mailing" the letters back and forth (I picked up and delivered letters to each group weekly), and their role in the project was clarified. Specifically, we agreed that they would allot time each week for the reading and writing of pen pal letters and they would

encourage students to apply writing skills they were learning in class. Resource teachers agreed not to point out mistakes or make corrections on their students' letters; however, they did encourage their students to do personal editing. Occasionally, a student's handwriting or spelling was such that my students could not make sense of the message. In this case, the resource teacher provided a written translation of the letter after it had been officially mailed by the student.

Resource teachers structured letter writing time in ways that met the needs of their classroom and provided a description of this structure for my students. Some teachers set up a letter-writing center and allowed students to select a time during their independent work time to write their letters, while other teachers allotted specific writing time for the entire group. One teacher provided a real mailbox within the classroom in which students mailed their completed letters. Additionally, the resource teacher provided information for my students throughout the semester regarding instructional content and school activities that might affect the students' writing. For instance, if the students were studying proper nouns or being introduced to cursive writing, my students could watch for potential changes in student letters and encourage their pen pals to use the newly acquired skills. By being aware of such things as school carnivals, Grandparent's Day, and other school activities, my students were able to initiate topics that were directly related to the students' current personal experiences. This information was conveyed to me through informal notes accompanying the weekly letters, and I, in turn, shared the information with my students.

University student responsibilities. During the first week of each semester, my university students were introduced to the pen pal project. They were told they would be writing letters throughout the semester to an elementary student experiencing reading and writing difficulties. My students were given the name, grade level, and approximate reading level of their pen pal. To protect the elementary student's confidentiality, my students were not told their pen pal's specific handicapping condition.

University students received a letter from their pen pal and wrote return letters weekly. I

collected letters on scheduled class dates and delivered them to the elementary school the following day, and letters were distributed to elementary students by their teacher. I then picked up their return letters to their pen pals several days later so that I could distribute them to my students during our next class meeting.

Initial letters of both groups often included questions and responses related to family, pets, personal and school interests, and personal appearance. To respond to the curiosity of the elementary students regarding their pen pals, individual pictures were taken of my students and given to them to send to their pen pals. Elementary students were delighted and often responded by returning a personal photo. University students frequently were invited by their pen pals to join them for lunch or visit school for special events, and although not required, these personal contacts were encouraged.

Given holidays, absences, or other events that kept pen pals from writing, the weekly rotation of letters allowed students to receive approximately 10 to 12 letters throughout the semester. It was evident that the elementary students counted on receiving their letters each week. Consequently, if my students missed a class, they were expected to get their letters to me on schedule. In the event of unexpected absences, I wrote personal notes to students as a proxy pen pal in an attempt to provide continuity and motivation for them to write a letter, even though they had not received one from their personal pen pal.

Letter writing was only one component of the pen pal project. Beyond writing the weekly letter, my students were expected to: (a) thoughtfully respond to the needs and interests of their pen pals in ways that encouraged writing progress; (b) keep files of letters received from their pen pals, numbering and dating each letter; (c) observe and analyze their pen pals' writing development in the areas of legibility, mechanics, spelling, language usage, creativity and originality of ideas, idea development, etc., keeping records of observed changes; and (d) submit the file of collected letters and two copies of their analyses (one for their pen pal's teacher and one for me) in the form of a final paper on a specified date at the end of the semester.

A look at one classroom

Following is a description of how Lana Christensen, a resource teacher, integrated this pen pal activity into her language arts curriculum. The second- through fifth-grade students in her class, whose reading levels ranged from preprimer to early second grade, came to Lana for all of their reading and language arts instruction. One day of the week was designated as "Letter-Writing Day." When the students came into the resource room, letters from the university students were passed out and read individually. If students needed help reading, they sought assistance from either a peer, the paraeducator, or Lana. Lana met individually with each student and together they developed a plan for answering the letter. She reviewed the overall format of a friendly letter, starting with the proper placement of the greeting, and developed a guide on a small piece of paper for the student to follow. This guide provided cues for proper format, as well as word cues to facilitate organization and recall of content. The student then was asked to go through and circle all the question marks in the letter received. Lana reminded the student that these were questions that should be answered in the return letter. She asked the student to answer the question verbally, and through an interactive discussion, she and the student would agree on a word or phrase that represented the student's verbal response (see Figure 1). Lana wrote down that word or phrase to serve as a cue when the student wrote independently. This process was repeated for each question asked. Lana then asked if there was anything the student would like to tell or ask his or her pen pal. Again, single words or simple phrases were generated as recall cues and added to the guide. If the student wanted to ask a question, the cue word or phrase was written and followed by a question mark as a reminder to use proper punctuation. Finally, Lana asked if there was anything private that the student would like to share. If the student said there was, she wrote "secret" as the reminder. A discussion about the student's desired closing also led to a written cue for proper format. The student then returned to his or her seat to compose independently using the guide generated with Lana. Students wrote from 20 minutes to one hour and were allowed to do independent reading when letters were completed.

Figure 1
Sample guide generated by the student and teacher
to aid student's recall when writing a pen pal letter

- (1) Dear _____,
- (2) - fine ("How are you?")
- (3) - swimming ("What did you do this weekend?")
- (4) - Twins ("So, who do you think will win the World Series?")
- (5) - World Series? (Who do you think will win the World Series?)
- (6) - pets (I have a dog that is named Cassy and a cat named Fluff.)
- (7) - lunch? (Could you come to school and have lunch with me?)
- (8) - secret
- (9) Your friend,

Project outcomes

Benefits for elementary students. The pen pal project was not designed specifically as a writing intervention. However, it was hoped that the meaningfulness of the activity would motivate elementary students to write and provide them with practice of skills taught in their regular and resource classrooms. Fulfillment of this hope was confirmed by university students' observations and documentation of positive changes by all pen pals in at least one area of writing skill. Although credit for all growth cannot be attributed solely to this project, specific growth areas likely resulting from the project were students' increased ability to use correct letter form (observed in 47%

of the students) and their increased use of communicative writing (observed in 78% of the students). Letter form was assessed by comparing the format of first and last letters; communicative style was assessed by looking at the number of questions students asked, the number of questions to which students responded, movement from more formal to less formal responses, and the appearance of student-initiated topics that gave information to and sought information from their university pen pal.

Resource teachers identified additional benefits to students participating in the pen pal project. The reading instruction these students received for 60 to 90 minutes daily involved a

basal series and direct instruction of reading skills. In addition, participating students were involved in a mainstream communications class that provided some opportunity for journal writing, and in another schoolwide program that encouraged daily reading of extended texts. Thus, weekly letter writing was viewed by resource teachers as a useful complement to the already existing program components of skill instruction, personal writing, and extended reading. Specifically, teachers expressed the benefits gained by being able to teach elements of written expression (e.g., capitalization, punctuation, etc.), as well as specific letter-writing skills, and to have a vehicle for immediate, direct application of skills taught. Additionally, the response to students' letters by their university pen pals provided a very personal form of feedback and reinforcement for their writing efforts.

Another benefit was the increased motivation and willingness of students to engage in a writing activity. While letter writing to friends has been documented as the most favorable writing activity of students in Grades 1-8 (Hogan, 1980), for many students with a history of school failure any activity requiring extended reading and writing frequently is viewed negatively. For the students involved in this project, however, resource teachers reported high enthusiasm for the project and increased motivation toward writing. Many students were observed reading and rereading earlier letters received from their pen pal and writing letters for an entire hour.

A less obvious but potentially more powerful benefit for the elementary student was the opportunity to develop a personal relationship and attachment to a positive adult. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Brockern (1990) state that "the most potent behavioral influence that an adult can have in the life of a child comes when an attachment has been formed" (p. 60). The pen pal pairs developed a personal connectedness that increased as the semester progressed. In most cases the pairs readily became friends and enjoyed a meaningful interchange. The following examples serve to illustrate the significance of some of the relationships that formed. One young girl was reevaluated for special education services and found to have made gains that allowed her to be dismissed from special education and re-

turn full time to the regular classroom. Her initial response was that she did not want to make the move if it meant losing her pen pal. Needless to say, arrangements were made so she could continue writing from her new classroom. Another student moved to a new school and was having difficulty adjusting. Soon after the move, his new teacher requested that his university pen pal write to him at the new school to help provide some continuity and ease the transition.

Elementary students also used their pen pal correspondence to share feelings and concerns regarding difficult school or family situations. The following excerpts illustrate student-initiated comments:

I'm no to happy that we gave my dog away but he has a good home and he will have fun with the other 32 dogs. do you now we haf to move becose of the lanlord because he cut are water meter and it has been cood on by the dog and mice.
Your frien J

My goued math [grandmother] is in the hapetal [hospital].

I am fine but this girl keeps bothering me. School is going fine but there is problems.

I was ill for one day. but on friday i miss going camping be case i had an asthmaatank. I was cofing hard and hard to breth at least we have a ma-chen for me and my sister and brot

I got beeten up by danyell yesterday.

University students apparently were perceived as safe adults and served as sympathetic listeners to some very personal concerns.

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Benefits for university students. This project challenged the university participants to develop a personal relationship with a student through written communication and required them to apply what they had learned in psychology and education classes regarding developmental processes, curriculum, and

teaching methods. The weekly letters allowed them to actually see the writing difficulties and to confront the frustrations commonly experienced by students struggling to gain competence in literacy. The following student comment is illustrative of this:

School can be difficult in itself; however, for the remedial reader the struggle is more enduring and the rewards come at a harder cost. T is a fifth-grade student who has a reading level similar to that of a first-grade student. As I complete my English/Reading endorsement, T was the first remedial reader I had contact with. On the outside T was similar to most fifth graders, yet through our correspondence with each other, I saw the challenges that she dealt with.... I wish I could be a miracle worker and fix whatever problems she had each day.

University students were challenged to engage students in writing. Some elementary students were somewhat reluctant to invest themselves in this project and required effort and creativity from their pen pals to get them motivated. Examples of some special efforts included "back and forth" stories in which each pen pal would add a paragraph each week, jokes and riddles that would not be answered until the following week, pictures and mementos sent from vacations, gum and candy taped to letters "just for being my friend," and a visit to school, probably the most effective strategy for increasing motivation. Many university students gained a deeper understanding of the level of commitment that is needed to reach students who have experienced school failure.

Finally, this project pushed preservice teachers to "think like teachers." These teachers-to-be had to apply what they knew about language learning, written expression, reading and writing connections, developmental growth, assessment, establishing learning environments, instructional methods, and strategic teaching to answer questions and support their perspectives and decisions. Students were asked to address the following questions in their final analyses: (a) From your pen pal's writing, what can you confidently say he or she knows about language? About the mechanics of writing? About the process of writing? (b) What guesses or hypotheses would you make that could explain the consistency, inconsistency, progress, or lack of progress observed in your pen pal's writing throughout the semester? (c) If you were this student's teacher, what area(s) would you target for

growth and instruction? Why? (d) How would you, as the student's teacher, facilitate growth in the targeted area(s)? Specifically, what methods or strategies would you use and why would you select these over other alternatives?

My goal of fostering "teacher thinking" was embodied in the overall question, "If you were this child's teacher, what would you do to insure the child's continued growth as a writer?" I openly acknowledged the disadvantage of not having daily face-to-face interactions with their pen pals. As educators, we often do not have all the information we would like and are forced to make educated guesses with limited amounts of information. Consequently, my students' task was to support their comments and suggestions with sound logic and learning theory.

Excerpts from one university student's final analysis and three of her pen pal's letters provide an example of responses to these questions. These passages were selected to illustrate the observations and reflective thinking typically demonstrated by my students. Figure 2 shows the first, third, and tenth letter written by a fourth-grade boy. The selected portions of my student's paper present her ideas regarding the clarity of his writing and idea development, punctuation, spelling, and possible instructional strategies.

Regarding the clarity of T's writing and his ability to develop ideas, my student wrote:

The message T is conveying is always evident. I would say his ability to write clearly has improved during the semester. His first letter was composed of six independent ideas expressed in sentence form. Letter #3 had several topics about the same theme, but they were not all grouped together. For example, he has a TV in his room and later in the letter he tells his favorite TV show, and still later he explains that his TV is big. Letter #10 has similar topics grouped together (bikes and schools), with five similar ideas about school grouped together.

The following comments were made about T's punctuation skills:

T's use of punctuation is developing, but could use reinforcing. In his first letter a period went at the end of a line whether the sentence ended or not. In letter #3, he used a comma and a question mark (although the "?" went after a period). In his letters, period use always dropped off later in the letter. I would be inclined to believe it's just carelessness. Often I think he hurries and punctuation is probably one of the least of his worries when he is writing. In letter #1, he was trying to develop the "I'm" contraction and it came out "Iam"; the next sentence he just used "I."

Figure 2
T's letters written during 3 different weeks of a semester

Letter #1

Dear Pen Pal,

my name T and I have a Dog.
I like to Play Nintendo and Play with.
my brothes and Sisers.
I am new at This school.
In 4th Grade.
I like to read Books some times.
Sincerely
T-

Dear D-

Letter #3

my Dog like to Jump, she a COOL Dog.
Brothers are good to have around.
Some times I like to Play outside
I have a TV. in my room.
Do you like Mc Hammer.
I like to Play football at home.
MY Brothers names is D- and
M-. They are nice.
I like full house if its a TV show
I like School Some times,
is College fun.
My T.V. is Big.
Do you have a Big T.V.?
I like The San Antonio SPRUS
I like to read Book.
Sincerely T-

Letter #10

Dear D-

I got a new Bike It is a to Speed
I ride fast on it. I like to Swing in the Park
and I got a new game I Play it with
my friends. I Play at recess.
The classes are fine at School.
I like to read some time.
I like School.
do you like The school you are going to?
your friend T-

Figure 3
J's letters to his university pen pal

J's first letter

My name is J-. I
am in the 5th grade. Here are
some things I'd like to tell you
about myself

I have 3 brother

I like to sleep

I like to play football

J's second letter

Dear F-

Fed, 6, 1990

I really enjoyed your letter.
I have three brothers + two sisters + yes I
have pets. One cat + his name is Gerio
+ 1 hamster + his named spanky.
I'm interested in sports. I play on a basketball
team. My team is the 49ers so I was really
happy about the super bowl.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?
I want to be a truck driver when
I grow up.

I'm hoping to meet you before you go
to Germany. I hear Germany is a nice
country. Have a good week.

from your friend

J-

T's spelling ability was described in this manner:

Spelling skills seem to be transitional. A word can be spelled correctly in one sentence, but not later on (letter #10—"school" and "like"). Possibly when he is writing he may try to only include words that he is fairly certain he can spell. The words "to," "two," and "too" are all represented by "to" (letters #1 and #10).

This student demonstrated insightful thinking and appropriate application of theory in the learning strategies suggested:

It is hard to identify specific strengths, but I would name the enthusiasm present in his letters and the use of good syntax in his writing as his strongest skills. He appears to be developing the paragraph concept. I would target increasing sentence complexity and paragraph formation as his next developmental frontiers. Where he is responsive to letter writing, I would set up a teacher-student written conversation during class. This activity could prove beneficial because conferencing could give feedback on strengths and weaknesses or give ideas for other interventions.

Following is an additional example from another pen pal pair that demonstrates unique observations and comments. Figure 3 includes two letters written by a fifth-grade boy before and after receiving a letter from his pen pal.

Regarding the dramatic difference in letters, my student remarked,

Wow! I couldn't believe this! After the first letter, I thought that my student had low skills for a fifth grader and would be really boring to write to. But look at the difference! This is a great example of what happens when the writing task is made personal and real. In the first letter I'm sure the teacher encouraged J to tell me something about himself. But I wasn't anybody to him so he probably didn't care much. After getting my letter and the picture I sent he was able to personally engage himself because I was a real person. This is a great example of how important it is to make reading and writing meaningful to kids or you won't be able to tell what they really do know.

At the conclusion of each semester of letter writing, the teachers of the elementary students were given copies of the analyses written by my students. Teachers looked forward to receiving the university students' sometimes naive, but often insightful, comments about their students. They appreciated the genuine concern shown and the perspectives and ideas shared. Teachers were very grateful for the commitment made to their students and all they learned by reading the university students' analyses. Reading the papers caused the teachers to reflect on the observa-

tions and comments and to consider seriously the instructional strategies suggested.

Concluding comments

This project served as a valuable learning experience for university students developing in their skills as teachers. It provided multiple examples of student writing and individual cases to discuss that included both strengths and weaknesses of real students. This created a meaningful context for generating hypotheses and proposing intervention strategies. Furthermore, the university pen pal provided a real audience for the student writer and served as a more knowledgeable other relative to the writing task. The classroom interaction between peers, as students read and discussed letters, provided additional opportunities for language and dialogue related to writing. Finally, the project provided a context for multiple student-teacher interactions related to topics, the writing process, and writing products.

The pairing of preservice teachers and nonconventional readers and writers provided opportunities for growth in both groups. However, if you are in a situation where you do not have access to university students, consider other potential partners who could provide similar modeling, motivation, and interest for your students. Options might include pairing of same- or different-age students within your school or a nearby school, retired teachers, rural or urban school partners, senior citizens, or individuals in the armed services. Although the benefits for each group may differ, the rewards to your students will be evident.

One of my students summed up the benefits of this project in the following statement:

Overall, I think this pen pal project has been very productive for both groups of students. We college students got an idea of how some students are writing and some ideas about how we would try to correct their problems. The elementary students got the opportunity to write to someone who is real and interesting, not just some fictitious person in a story. The more opportunities we give children to write, the better writers they will become.

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