“I don’t want to write!”
How does a pen pal program influence students’ writing?

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Teaching Context

I am currently a PDS intern in a self-contained second grade classroom at Panorama Village Elementary School. My second grade class consists of 20 students – 10 girls and 10 boys. All students are Caucasian. Four students have families who have immigrated to the United States. The Russian students speak Russian at home and English is their second language. Two of these students go to English as a Second Language (ESL) for one half hour four days a week. Two of my students go to Title I Reading on a daily basis for one half hour. One of my students attends Instructional Support for one half hour four days a week. One student attends both ESL and Title I classes, and one student goes to both Title I and Instructional Support. I have some students who are reading below grade level, and I also have students reading higher-level books than what is expected for this time of year in second grade.

Many of my students struggle when it comes to writing. They do not seem to enjoy it and they do not seem to know what they want to write. When they wrote in their weekly journals to my mentor teacher about one thing they did over the weekend, they had a very difficult time figuring out what they wanted to write about and then actually writing it. Many students would only write a few sentences with few details and they made many careless mistakes. I also had students who would sit and not write anything because they did not know what they wanted to write.

Due to my students dislike of writing, I chose to implement a pen pal program with a sixth grade class, also located in this district to be pen pals with my students. I chose sixth grade because I felt the older students could provide good writing models for my students. There are 25 sixth grade students, so I chose five of my stronger writers to write to two pen pals. I gave
my students time to write their letters in class one and time in class to edit their letters the next
day. They also were able to use any free time during the days to complete their letters.

Wonderings and Questions

Main Wondering

• How will pen pals affect my students’ writing?

Sub questions

• How will my students’ motivation to write be effected by a pen pal program?
• How will their handwriting change?
• How will giving my students a choice in writing topics for their pen pal letters influence their writing?
• How will my students’ writing mechanics be impacted?
  • This includes:
    • Will my students correctly spell their no excuse words, spelling words, and use sound spelling?
    • How will my students’ use of capitals at the beginning of sentences and for names of people and places be impacted while writing to their pen pals?
    • Will my students use the appropriate punctuation in their letters to their pen pals?
    • How will their grammar be influenced by pen pals?
    • How will my students’ use of run-on sentences change while writing to their pen pals?
Data Collection

I used three methods of data collection throughout the inquiry process. I used the journals about their weekend that they were familiar twice in this process – once prior to writing to their pen pals and once after writing three letters. The second method of collecting data was student surveys. I used the surveys to monitor my students’ feelings toward writing in general, and also in specific areas, because I wanted to look at their motivation toward writing over the course of the pen pal writing. The third method of data collection was the pen pal letters. I photocopied each letter the students wrote to monitor and track their writing.

Journals

I began collecting data at the end of January by asking my students to write a journal entry to me about one thing they did over the weekend. I had the students write this journal so that I would have a sample of their prior work. This was a normal and routine task for the students, one that they have been doing since the beginning of the school year. It is, however, one that is usually accompanied by complaints and “I don’t remember what I did!” I collected these and kept them in order to refer back to them.

I used this sample of writing as my baseline data for the students. When I looked at possible improvements or problems in their pen pal letters, I used this journal entry as my point of reference because it was a familiar task for the students. I began by entering the data from their work into a spreadsheet about their writing mechanics, such as capitals, punctuation, spelling, run-on sentences, and grammar. I also recorded in my spreadsheet the number of complex sentences, the quality of handwriting, and the amount of detail present in the journal, which I continued doing with all the students’ work throughout the process. This evaluation method was applied to all of the students’ journals and pen pal letters.
I also used journal writing a second time during the inquiry process, after the students had already written three pen pal letters. This time, I chose to first model writing a journal entry to the students. I had the students assist me in brainstorming and writing a journal entry to them about my weekend before asking them to write to me. I also included the data from these letters they wrote back to me in my spreadsheet, analyzing their mechanics, details, complex sentences, and handwriting. Examples of student work can be found in Appendix A.

**Surveys**

I surveyed the students before beginning to write to their pen pals and then again later, after they had written to their pen pals three times in order to track how they were feeling toward writing. I used smiley faces for the students to color how they felt about writing in general, and also in different areas such as: diaries, stories, their journals to my mentor and myself, and if they liked to share their writing with other people. I explained that the smiley face meant they really liked it, the frowning face meant they really do not like it, and the face in the middle was if they did not like it a lot but they did not strongly dislike it. On the pre survey, I included one open-ended question asking if they liked to write to their pen pals.

I chose smiley faces because I did not want to have many open-ended questions. I felt my students would not want to answer these and that their answers would not be well thought out or explained. I also did not want the writing on the survey to impact their overall attitude toward writing. I wanted the survey to focus on the writing they do in general in the classroom, such as the journals. On the first survey, I did include one open-ended question, “What is one thing you want to write about in this class?” I included this so I would have an idea of topics to choose for them to write about in their pen pal pal letters, but I chose not include their responses in my data because the responses were varied and many did not reflect how they feel toward writing. I used
their responses to consider possible writing topics for the pen pal letters, although many responses did not fit in with corresponding with a pen pal.

**Pen pal letters**

Along with the journal entries to myself and the two student surveys, I have also copied and saved all the letters the students have written to their pen pals in order to refer back to them throughout the inquiry process. I have entered all the data from these letters into my spreadsheet, along with their journal entries to compare their growth throughout these few months. I have used the spreadsheet to analyze their writing and the letters to compare their details, complex sentences, and their handwriting. Examples of letters can be found in Appendix B.

**Observations**

My last type of data collection was observations. On January 21, 2008, I observed that several students were upset that their pen pal letters were not available for them to work on after they had finished their math work. A second observation was on March 20, 2008. I was working with a student on his pen pal letter. This student was very excited to write his letter, but his mind was moving faster than he could write.

**Explanation of Findings**

**Claim 1:** Writing to pen pals has had both a negative and a positive effect on my students’ writing.

- **Evidence A:** The students asked more questions in their pen pal letters than other writing. Journal writing did not allow the students to ask any questions. The journal was focused on the students writing about their weekend and did not provide the students with the opportunity to ask questions. However, while writing to the pen pals, my students were very interested in their lives and were very eager to ask
questions. Some students forget punctuation when writing the questions, but they were able to practice writing questions.

• **Evidence B:** Students had more incorrect or missing punctuation marks after writing to their pen pal three times than before they began. My students used either incorrect punctuation or no punctuation at all, however, they were writing more questions than they had in their journals. Most of the missing or incorrect punctuation was found in the questions.

• **Evidence C:** The decline in mechanics was partially a result of the students’ excitement. For example, I had a student who was eager to write and I could tell that his mind was moving a great deal faster than he could possibly write. He had all these wonderful ideas in his head that he wanted to write about, but he could not keep up with them fast enough.

• **Evidence D:** Students wrote more complex sentences after writing to their pen pals than before. In their first pen pal letter, fourteen students did not include any complex sentences. Five students used one complex sentence and only one student used two complex sentences. In their second journal entry, which was completed after they had written three pen pal letters, seven students did not use any complex sentences, which was half the number of students that did not use any in their first pen pal letter. Seven students used only one complex sentence, two more students than the first sample, five students used two, four more than the previous letter, and one student included four complex sentences in his letter. (See Appendix C)
Claim 2: Students enjoy writing to pen pals.

- **Evidence A:** On my post student survey 25% of my students said they enjoyed writing. However, when asked how they felt about writing to their pen pals, 60% said they enjoyed it. This difference demonstrates that students enjoy writing to their pen pals more than they enjoy writing in other areas, such as stories, diaries, and journals.

- **Evidence B:** Seven out of 20 students responded by choosing the second smiley face; they did not like pen pals but they also did not strongly dislike them. Only one student does not like writing to her pen pal, according to the second student survey. Only having one student out of twenty students dislike writing to their pen pal shows that students are excited and eager to write to their pen pals.

- **Evidence C:** Six students were indifferent toward writing in general, but chose the smiley face indicating they enjoy writing to their pen pals.

- **Evidence D:** Two students strongly do not like to write but responded by saying they enjoy writing to their pen pals. This difference is extremely important, because these students do not enjoy writing but they do enjoy corresponding with their pen pals. This fact proves that pen pals are motivating for students who otherwise do not enjoy writing.

- **Evidence E:** One student strongly dislikes writing in general, but is indifferent toward writing to his pen pal.

Claim 3: Students are more motivated to write to their pen pals than other types of writing in class.

- **Evidence A:** On my first student survey, 42% of students marked the second smiley face when asked if they liked to write, while 24% students strongly disliked writing.
On the second survey, 55% of students were in the middle and 20% did not like to write. However, when asked how they felt about writing to their pen pals, 35% of students were in the middle and only 5% of students did not like to write to their pen pals. This data reveals that while students may not enjoy writing, all students with the exception of one at least somewhat enjoyed writing to their pen pals. (See Appendix for complete set of charts.)

- **Evidence B:** Pen pal letters received the most positive feedback than any other type of writing from both the first and second survey. Twelve students out of twenty said they strongly like writing to their pen pals. No other area received that many positive votes. Writing in their Miss Talarico or Mrs. Tubbs journals received the next highest amount of positive feedback, with ten students responding favorably on the first student survey.

- **Evidence C:** On January 31, 2008, I was out of the classroom during the entire afternoon. That morning, the students had been working on writing and editing their pen pal letters. I had collected these letters and had taken them with me during my meeting. When I returned from the meeting, it was dismissal time and I was greeted by a few of my students. I had two students upset with me because I had their pen pal letters. These students had wanted to edit their letters after finishing math work and had not been able to. Students had never asked me before if they could finish editing their journals after math. This demonstrates that students enjoy writing their letters and are willing to use any free time they have during the school day to work on their letters.
Reflection and Implications for Future Practice

This pen pal program has been a success in my class. My students are excited every time they receive a letter from their pen pal. Many end their letters by saying, “I can’t wait to get another letter!” They anxiously wait to receive a new letter and they are very happy when the letters arrive. All of my students are highly engaged while reading their letters. My classroom is quiet when they are reading their letters, aside from the excited student calling me over to show me what their pen pal has written to them.

When it comes to writing their letters back to their pen pals, many students quickly begin by answering their pen pal’s questions without any complaints. This is very different from writing in their Miss Talarico or Mrs. Tubbs journals, when they usually complain that they do not know what to write. I did have students complain that they were not sure what to write to their pen pals and some students have included many questions, despite the limit I placed on questions, but overall my students were excited and eager to begin responding to their pen pals.

The students also receive practice in areas that are not covered well in normal classroom writing, such as weekly journals about their weekends. The students write more questions than they do in any other area when writing to their pen pals. I chose to put a limit on the number of questions my students could ask, because I knew with the group of students I have, their letters would consist of almost all questions.

The students have also worked on answering questions asked by their pen pals. I had to explain that their answers could not be one word, because their pen pal will not know what the student is answering. This is an area where they have not had much practice, but is an important area. They have done a wonderful job answering their pen pals’ questions. When I read over their letters, I have no trouble understanding what questions they have been asked.
I plan on continuing pen pals for the rest of this school year. My students want to meet their pen pal, so I am going to plan this after we have exchanged a few more letters. I also will create pen pal programs in my future classrooms. My students have enjoyed writing to sixth graders; they love to ask them if they remember second grade and they enjoy learning about life in the middle school.

I am going to use a pen pal program in my future classes. Despite the fact that my students’ mechanics did not improve greatly, I believe that over time and through more letter exchanges the students’ correct use of capitals, punctuation, and grammar will increase. I will, however, introduce it at the beginning of the year, instead of half way through. The students will have prompts for topics for their pen pal letters, but they will not be required to write about these. The prompts will be used to help students who are unsure of what to write or are stuck and need an idea. All other students will be allowed to choose what they want to write, as long as it is appropriate and they are giving sufficient details.

Overall, I feel that a pen pal program is an excellent way to increase motivation toward writing and to introduce students to important writing concepts, such as asking and answering questions. Through corresponding with a pen pal, my students have a form of writing that many of them enjoy and look forward to. I will continue a pen pal program this year and in my future teaching because I want to promote learning to enjoy writing as much as possible because it is a crucial part of everyday life.

New Wonderings

After my experiences with this pen pal program, I have developed additional wonderings. I plan on studying these both this year and in my future teaching. I also plan on looking into different ways to motivate students to write.
• How will implementing a pen pal program at the beginning of the school year impact students’ writing?
• Will my students’ mechanics improve after continuing corresponding with pen pals?
• How will writing to a pen pal motivate my students after the excitement has worn off?
• How can I motivate students to enjoy writing to a pen pal if they do not enjoy it?
Feb. 4, 2008

Dear Ms. Talarico,

This weekend my grandma brought her friend (Pattie-Pattie) to our house. We all had a humungously fun time. We played UNO while she was there! She said “I had a greatly fun time, it’s just too bad I have to go home so soon.” I said I do not her.

Love,
Ben
Feb 4, 2008

Dear Miss Talarico,

When me, my Mother and Josh went to Penny’s I slipped on the ice. I got up and I was hurt. When we got in the store we bought pants. Then we bought an outfit of pink, yellow, and hotpink tank top with a sweater that was hotpink jeans were with it. I’m wearing it with a skirt.

Love,

Hannah
Feb. 4, 2008

Dear Miss Talarico,

On Friday I went sledding with my brother on a big icy hill. We were sledding until my friend Kristina and her brother Roman came to sled with us. I was going up the hill then I fell on my bottom. It hurt! Then a couple minutes past and my brother said lots make a jump. So me and my friend Kristina got a sled and a snowboard and went to get some white snow. We made a jump then we were sledding and sledding the whole afternoon. Then
Appendix B.1

Mar. 3, 2008

Dear Melissa,

I do not have any pets. My favorite game is tag; what is your favorite game? My favorite season is Summer; what is your favorite season? I like 2nd grade it is fun. Do you like 2nd grade? What is your favorite sport? My
Appendix B.11

Dear Melissa,

I am so happy to read your letter! I am so proud that you like 6th grade. I have four sisters and two brothers.
I have nine people in my family. My birthday is on October 6th. When is your birthday? I do fun things in summer. I do not have an AIM.
I like summer the best because you get to swim and do fun things. I like to have sleep overs with my best friend. What fun things do you do with your best friends? With my family we went to the Easter Egg Hunt.
Dear Cameron,

My name is Kacey. My favorite color is blue. What is yours? Do you have pets? I have 5 pets and a lot of fish. My birthday is March 31. When is yours? I'm going to turn 8. How old are you turning? I have a lot of friends. How many do you have? I like to play football. Do you?
Dear Cameron,

I went no we're over spring break. I would chew chocolate. My birthday is coming! Me and my cousins played firefighter. We pretended bike helmets were fire fighter helmets. I had a turkey, wasn't potatoes and corn. My mom cooked. My whole team was there. My guinea pig died. I went to visiting with the dinosaurs. There were teeth hanging
Dear Clark,

Now its my turn to answer the questions. My favorite food is pizza. My favorite sport is baseball. My favorite thing to is cub scouts because on Saturday I got my wolf badge. It was three hours long!! Here a question
Dear Clark,

Did you go to wakeing with Dinasaurs? It was alson! Do you think--

They com! What's your favite toy? My favite toy is black buster. It is alson! I've to more than cud svout. What's bone series?

Nice piche. There where two trasairtops and one tr. rex and one baby tr. rex oneanclice. The two trasairtops fitit. First a raper ate baby.

A allosaurus atak a plesuvis.

Love

Carl

Mar. 20, 2008
### Appendix C

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<th>First Pen Pal Letter</th>
<th>Second Journal Entry</th>
<th>Improvement</th>
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Appendix D

Pre Student Survey
Name: _______________________

1. Do you like to write?

2. Do you like to write stories?

3. Do you like to write in a diary?

4. Do you like to share your writing with other people?

5. Do you like writing in your journals to Miss Talarico and Mrs. Tubbs?

6. What is one thing you want to write about in this class?