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Effects of University Pen Pals on the Literacy Development of Elementary School Students

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Introduction

For students attending an institution here in the United States, being able to write did not come naturally. It took many years of being in elementary school to get to a point in their developmental growth to finally be able to write a coherent, error-free sentence on their own. For some students, the motivation to learn to write came with ease. However, this was not always the case. Almost 40-percent of high schoolers are completely unmotivated when it comes to school, and allow themselves to fail without thinking of repercussions (Crotty, 2013). Some students needed an incentive to write and develop their literacy. The theory is that students will not learn unless they want to. So how does one get students to actually want to learn how to write? Pen pals are commonly used amongst classrooms globally, and when successfully done can provide students with an experience that they can not only be proud of, but take literacy skills with them through out their educational career.

Having worked with high schoolers consistently for three years, it was evident a lot of students had already given up on their schooling. Many students lacked the motivation, because they found a lot of basic skills in reading, writing, and even mathematics to be difficult. Evidence shows this could be because of their socio-economic background, as low-income families often lack the resources to be able to assist student learning from home. Student learning doesn't always take place in the school, as it should continue into the homes of students with the assistance of their parents. At this point, they're at an even larger disadvantage as they will only receive instruction for six hours at school, while more privileged children will go to school and come home to continue learning guided by their parents (Morrison, Bachman, & Connor, 2005).

The reason for choosing university students as the recipient for elementary school students is to get students at an earlier age to consider higher education as well as the work

needed in order to get there. For those with a lack of motivation through out their educational career, the opportunity for aspirations from a college student could benefit them. By introducing students to the idea of college, it can kickstart brainstorming on future occupations and considering the work that comes with it. Through college student pen pals, students strive to be able to communicate with their recipients and inspire them to attend college in the future. “Motivated by writing their own interests and thoughts and validated...students permanently learn the many skills that require to be literate... they put the child in control of their own learning; and with this control comes empowerment and success when accompanied by the support and guidance of a teacher...” (Casey, 2000).

Students don't intentionally fail, nor do they want to. Most of the time students are set up for failure as part of their background, or other unforeseen circumstances. Not all students come from white privileged families. As teachers, we want to give our students the best opportunities that we can. A teacher should be able to communicate using English in a proficient and well-understood manner, but also be able to understand the backgrounds that students come from in order to give them equitable treatment. (Ellis & McCartney, 2011). Assuming that this is already a given, teachers could greatly benefit with the addition of a pen pal project for their students. Although a lot of preparation is required for the project to go smoothly, the linguistic benefits from the reading and writing for elementary school students to their recipients are greatly astounding.

These benefits include access to assets of texts to be able to read, and then create corresponding replies allowing them to practice their reading and writing skills. The more practice students have the opportunity to receive, the more chances they have to practice developing their literacy, which would be the goal of the pen pal project. Especially for students

who do not have opportunities to read at home with a parent, they would have the opportunity to read a letter written to them from their pen pal. The idea is that through the pen pal project, students will consistently read and respond to their recipients and practice their reading and writing skills.

My primary research question is how will university pen pals affect the literacy development of elementary school students, specifically first graders? My secondary research question are as follows: What does research say about the effects of university pen pals on the literacy development of elementary school students? How will elementary school students benefit from university pen pals in terms of their literacy development based on literature? How do the university pen pals affect the literacy development of elementary school students according to university students? In what ways could teachers incorporate pen pal writing to help students improve their literacy development?

Literature Review

Many researchers in the past have created pen pal projects connecting students to children in other countries. These international exchanges can be beneficial to both parties as it would allow both groups of students to practice their literacy skills, as well as the English language as it is mostly predominant around the world. One school in Colorado documented its exchange with students in Belize (Kishner & Tzib, 2017). The students were older, around fourth grade, and had planned on exchanging supplies to the children in Belize in order to donate extra resources. The teachers wanted to do more than just donate, and the students in Belize had created the idea of making lesson on teaching the Belizean flag. This would have been a much better, in both ethics and quality of teaching, way of exchanging cultures.

Pen pal projects in the past have been criticized for the way they belittle their recipients in other countries. American children have much better resources and privilege than other kids in less fortunate populations. The letters should be an exchange of questions and ideas in order to gain new perspective, not to belittle them or to prove that American children are better (Fresne, 2016). This would be a very unethical way to practice pen pals, and although it would be unintended to try to put kids in other countries down, it is also very avoidable.

A more ethical pen pal project was one group of students in an urban area, and another group of students in a suburban neighborhood. Although the two groups of students were in the same country, they both come from polar opposite backgrounds. The inner-city students were exposed to what life was like in the suburban neighborhood school, but the students still enjoyed the same things (Brand & Dalton, 2016).

With the growing amount of technology in children's lives, it is no wonder that the idea of electronic online pen pals would be possible for students. However, there have been connections that electronic pen pals might not be the best idea. One of the more crucial traits of a pen pal project, especially for younger children, is that they develop the muscles in their hands and eye-hand coordination for writing. By typing on a computer, this would take away a major effect of pen pals. If supplemented with both traditional letter writing and electronic typing, then the children would benefit in both their typing skills and written communication skills (Branzburg, 2002). For the older students who have mastered basic writing by hand, they can move onto typing to e-pen pals. E-pen pals should only be avoided for children that are too young for the computer, and should stick to developing basic literacy skills first.

The ultimate goal of literacy development in younger children is to create meaning. By connecting thoughts to words, students are able to understand the meaning of what they're

reading or writing and the coherent thoughts they have. Children make hundreds of connections of the world around every minute, even just by observing. When they have to write down their thoughts, it takes practice to be able to think a thought and then control the still-developing muscles in their hands in order to write something while looking down on paper. It seems so trivial for most adults to think about struggling when writing with a pencil on paper. They often forget that for children, it takes a lot of time and practice to develop their literacy to what it is now. Through writing letters to pen pals, they are able to think and discuss what they are going to write. Thoughts are bounced around amongst the students as they brainstorm what to ask their pen pal. Or if they are responding to a letter, they will read and decode the letter in order to unpack what their pen pal is trying to convey (Brand & Dalton, 2016).

With that said, bilingual students could also benefit from having either an English-literate pen pal or one who speaks the same language the student speaks at home. This is because students will often use the language they use at home as a tool for learning and writing English. It becomes an asset, and when they practice, for example, writing in Spanish, they are able to transfer the skills for when they write in English (Garcia-Vasquez & Vasquez, 1994).

By writing letters to college students, students are able to de-code and develop their phonemic awareness. This means, being able to understand what and how the letters make up the words on paper in order to convey a meaning. (Morrison, Bachman, & Connor, 2005). Students are then able to make a web of thoughts to map everything together into a web of understanding. They are able to make connections to their self, to the written text, and to the world through writing to their pen pals. Especially for college students, they would be able to gain a new perspective on what it is like for higher education.

Methods and Procedures

In order to evaluate and collect more research on the topic of university students as pen pals for elementary school students, a first grade classroom at a school in the Monterey County area was chosen to be apart of a pen pal project. After ensuring students were granted permission from their parents to be apart of this pen pal project, a lesson plan was created in order to be taught (See Appendix A). The lesson plan consisted of defining salutations, closings, and other writing necessities in order for students to fully understand how to write a conversational letter to a pen pal. It also ensured the safety of the students to protect sensitive and identifying information. Five students out of a class of 26 were able to participate in the university pen pal project, and two college students were able to consensually respond over the course of two weeks.

The students were curious enough to discuss the characteristics of being a college student as a group. They challenged ideas such as college-level math, being independent and away from parents, as well as not having a bedtime. It was plenty to get them to start writing, and they asked for spelling support often. This is a good sign because it showed that they not only care about their spelling accuracy, but also they wanted to convey their questions in a well-formed manner. They especially strived to ensure their messages were legible to the best of their abilities. It was important that they weren't fed certain words or given scripted questions to ask. Authenticity is crucial for student growth, as copying examples does not help and could harm their literacy development instead (Ortlieb & Cheek, 2003).

After the project was complete after two weeks, the college students were given a short questionnaire to reflect on the effects of their pen pal experience on the literacy development of the elementary school students (See Appendix B).The teacher was also informed to look at how

the pen pal project could have affected their literacy development evident in daily student activities and classwork to see if there were any subtle or drastic changes to their reading and writing skills. The results and findings of the pen pal project have been evaluated and are what follows.

Results and Findings

After completing the project, students were able to demonstrate eye-hand coordination writing with their pencils on paper. This provided added practice to develop the muscles in their hands in order to write to their pen pals. The students were motivated to write to their college student pen pals. They were interested in what life was like, and what they would learn. It was interesting to hear the questions being discussed, as it meant that they were also developing language abilities as they spoke to each other. Their class does not get very much small-group time for discussions, as the teacher's pedagogical methods are mostly whole class and when they are put into small groups it is mostly for mathematics. The different setting for discussion amongst their peers helped develop their speaking abilities as they connected their thoughts into verbal words. This would translate into their writing as they would be able to create meaning into their written words.

Research had also stated that the students would most benefit from having pen pals is to be able to transfer their thoughts onto paper. This was evident during the project as one could see the students brain-storming their questions before writing them down. This alone would help them with their literacy development, as it is the connection of mind to being able to write it down that allows students to understand the comprehension of being able to write things down. Once this skill is developed, it is then a matter of learning syntax, grammar, and spelling.

Dear college student, My name is [redacted] do you live with your parents? What kind of math do you do? Does $20 \times 20 = 400$? do you have a sister? where do you live? Sincerely [redacted]

Figure 1. Student B was able to create coherent sentences to their pen pals.

After listening to the each other discuss what they wanted to ask their college student, it was then they had to write their questions down in the form of a letter. The students had some trouble doing this, as they were able to ask a lot of questions verbally. However, they had trouble writing their cohesive thoughts down despite just having said them with enthusiasm to their friends. About two of the students became frustrated after only being able to write down a question or two, as they felt it was very hard to write. After reminders to just do the best that they

could and only needed support in very basic sentence structure, they were able to complete their letters. Any and all support was kept to very minimum basics, as influencing the students would eradicate the authenticity of the student's genuine thoughts and work. Not only this, but having their raw sentences without too much influence from being observed demonstrated their literacy growth as mistakes are a learning process.

The students had mistakes in their writing. Especially being in first grade, the students were set up for success but they weren't expected to be perfect letters. Although some of the letters were actually well-written, being able to write pen pal letters is practice for literacy development. In order to get better, they needed to keep writing and by writing their letters they were able to learn and grow.

Student A actually took a long time to write her letter, despite it being so short. After the discussion with their peers as they brainstormed ideas of what they wanted to know about their college student pen pals, Student A had plenty of ideas to give and she received a lot of feedback on what she wanted to ask from her peers. The students also supported each other in their letter writing and were able to exchange ideas to ask. Student A came up with a lot of questions, however when it came to writing them down she was very slow to do. She was able to make quick connections of what she wanted to know and what she wanted to ask. It took her a lot of time to be coherently write down the sentences she wanted to know. When it was time to go to P.E. after the lesson, she was upset it took her so long to write very little and still had more to ask. Her teacher on the other hand was proud of the sentences she was able to write, and was also able to see the connections between what she was thinking about asking and seeing it written down on paper.

Despite the frustration, the students gained more experience on being able to write. First grade is a year for basics, and since writing is a developmental skill it helped them even if only a little in more practice in writing. Although there wasn't the ability to correct the letters on the spot in front of them, as it would have been unnecessary to try to call them out on their mistakes in front of their peers, their strengths were definitely demonstrated. For example, Student A's phonemic awareness and understanding of spaces between her words was phenomenal. She was able to write and also de-code her pen pal's letter, with some support. One error to point out would be her misspelling of "with" as "weth." This is understandable for a first grader to make this sort of mistake, but she was very close to the actual spelling. It's especially better than the students who misspell "with" as "wth" or "wf" which is common for students to get confused with. Student A was able to not only write the correct "th," but also remember that there is a vowel. Even though a small bit of growth, it would have been interesting to see further past pieces of writing to see how far she has come.

After discussing the outcome of the project with the teacher, she had expressed that many of the students were able to benefit from the project. Students who were already strong writers to begin with had used the project as a form of extra practice. For students who were not very good writers to begin with, they benefitted the most from being able to leave their comfort zones and really force themselves to write questions from their own ideas. They wanted to be able to ask their college student pen pal, and their curiosity helped them as they wanted to know certain things from their pen pal.

Recommendation

After extensive research on the benefits of pen pal projects, and seeing the benefits of having students exchange letters with university students, I highly recommend that teachers

implement a university pen pal project into their classrooms if at all possible. If there is a local university nearby, teachers could get in touch with a professor who would be willing to volunteer their class. As someone with a current plan to be a professor, I would be more than happy to even make it a mandatory assignment for the college students in order to introduce them to early childhood literacy examples and create a cross-cultural exchange between the university students and first graders.

However, if the professors are too busy to do this then I do at least strongly recommend pen pals in order to develop the literacy of early elementary school students. When choosing recipients for a class, be sure that the cross-cultural exchanges are ethical in that the elementary school students are not trying to belittle their recipients. I would recommend that the recipients be of the same age as the elementary school students, but not local. That way, the group of students are able to exchange cultures that are not in their surroundings. Pen pals are great for students to gain new perspective on what the world is like, so long as their recipients are far away enough in either distance or cultures that the elementary school students are motivated to learn something.

Lastly, I do think that first-graders are too young for this project. Even with such a large amount of growth, they lacked the ability to really ask crucial questions. Although their literacy development was huge, their understanding of the culture they were trying to take in was somewhat a missed opportunity. Depending the teacher's motives for the project, if they are focused more on literacy development then first grade is an acceptable grade to give pen pals and any issues with the lack of being able to ask relevant questions can be smoothed out along the way. For first graders, it's critical that students stay on topic rather than ask very trivial questions.

Problems and Limitations

I had a lot of problems with recruiting participants for the pen pal project. When I introduced the project and consent forms in the first grade class, the children were very excited. Out of the class of 26 students, only seven had turned in consent forms and were willing to participate. However, only five of the participating students were present during my first lesson of actual pen-pal instruction. The lack of students limited the pool for collecting data, and overall weakened the evidence I was able to provide. Even worse, as I was recruiting the college students to volunteer to be participants only two of them turned in consent forms. The college students I had originally recruited to participate went MIA, which made both the first graders and I really sad.

The school I was working at also had a two-week spring break, as well as parent teacher conferences the week before. This meant I was only able to conduct consistent research for about two weeks roughly. If I had more time and had started a lot earlier, as well as given plenty of time for consent forms to be returned, the project would not have flopped as badly. Nonetheless, I was able to conduct most of my research through literature review and what little the evidence I was legally able to gather from the first graders' letters.

Lastly, I had a lot of trouble trying to find a pen pal project to research on similar to the one I had created. Most pen pal projects are intended to be cross-cultural, as the students will exchange letters with other children from around the world or locally. I was unable to find a detailed-project that was similar in that the recipients for the students were college students.

Overall, if I were to do this project again I would gather participants and include some sort of incentive in order to encourage volunteers not to abandon the experience early. I can't force people to write letters, but I hope I could encourage them to at least be rewarded for their time. It's difficult to do this at the undergraduate level because of a lack of funds, and I'd like to try this again later on in graduate school in order to get a better experience. I would also like to try an older grade, perhaps second or third. I felt that first grade was a bit too young for the project, but it was definitely do-able. I tried my best to make it work for a younger group of students, and if I had to do six-year-olds I would probably try writing letters to the teacher first in order to have that be their first experience. That way, the teacher could also correct and make amends so when they write a letter to their pen pal, it would be less experimental and they have a better idea of what kinds of things they could write or ask.

Conclusion

For students in elementary school, communicating to university students through ethical measures would provide a foundation to basic literacy skills, or help strengthen them. For younger students who need to master writing by hand first, traditional letters on paper written by a writing utensil would be best before learning to type on a computer. For older elementary school students, or those who are proficient at writing, they can write to their pen pal electronically through typing. It still offers the same literacy development of phonemic awareness, de-coding and unpacking letters, as well as creating literate sentences of coherent thoughts. Literacy development is best done in baby steps, and emailing pen pals should be done at a later age.

Students will also become better at writing through connecting thoughts and ideas into literate words. Especially as students begin to spell, they are motivated to do so because they

want to convey their message to their pen pal. It motivates them to write, and in turn motivates them to learn how to write. With a better and more positive attitude for learning, students are able to retain better and truly develop their literary skills.

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Appendix A

Writing Letters to a Pen Pal - Lesson Plan

Grade Level: First

Time needed: 30 minutes

Student Objectives and Learning Outcomes: Students will be able to demonstrate writing informational/explanatory texts about a topic, state an opinion, and write a letter using coherent sentences.

Explain

1. Students will write a letter to a college pen pal. Define what the words mean, “college, pen pal.” The purpose is to learn more about what it is like to be in college.
2. Teacher starts off with the salutation, “Dear College Pen Pal,” and discuss what the salutation is. Then explain what are some possible things you can write for the body of the letter. What are not good examples of questions to ask?
 - a. Good examples
 - i. Do you live with your parents? Do you have a job? What do you learn?
 - b. Bad examples
 - i. Where do you live? What’s your phone number?
3. Discuss a closing statement. “Best regards, thank you, sincerely, etc.”

Activity

1. Students will begin writing, and may ask questions about spelling, possible questions, etc.
2. Teacher should walk around the classroom to observe, and ensure students remain on-task and writing appropriate questions. Proofreading is also suggested, and writing certain phrases in between the lines of their work can go a long way in teaching them how to write coherent sentences correctly.

Appendix B

Exit Survey for College Students

1. Did your pen pal improve their literacy skills over the course of this project? Please explain why or why you think not?
2. What are some examples of how they have improved?
3. Do you think your participation in this pen pal project was helpful in some way to your pen pal's literacy development? Why or why not?